

LIVING IN THE TENSION:
AN EXPLORATION OF COMMON GRACE IN THE DUTCH CALVINIST TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

The relationship of Christianity to culture has been an enduring problem throughout the history of the church. Over the past century, the Dutch Calvinist tradition arguably has been the most well known for its views on this topic. However, within this group that shares a common theological foundation, there has been disagreement. It seems then that properly understanding how to live *in* the world but not *of* the world is more than simply a matter of cognitive assent to a set of theological doctrines, even one as robust and biblical as a Reformed world-and-life view. This paper compares and contrasts the views of three theologians from the Dutch Calvinist tradition, namely Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987), and Richard Mow (b. 1940), on the topic of common grace, one of the doctrines that undergirds a Calvinistic worldview, in order to make some comments on how a thoughtful follower of Jesus should approach an answer to the question of Christ and culture.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest paradoxes of the Christian life is found in these words of Jesus in his High Priestly Prayer: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. . . . As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:15-16, 18).¹ In the opening paragraph of his book, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, Henry Van Til says that this simple prayer for his disciples “constitutes the basis of the perennial problem involved in the discussion of Christian culture.”² What does it look like to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world? What is the nature of the relationship between Christianity and the broader culture? The followers of Christ are called to live a life on mission in the world, but are themselves sojourners and exiles in the world (c.f. 1 Pet 2:11; Phil 3:20). Not only that, but the world hates the followers of Christ as it hated Christ himself, who called his followers to love those who hate them (c.f. John 15:18-19; Matt 5:43-44). Thus, the inevitable question that every Christian must answer is, in the words of Francis Schaeffer, “How should we then live?”

A thoughtful response cannot be pulled out of thin air and consistently lived out. External actions flow from a well of deeply entrenched internal convictions, as J. Mark

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

² Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 15.

Bertrand, in his book *Rethinking Worldview*, explains: “The things we do flow from what we believe. Human behavior is not random. We act according to patterns, expectations, assumptions, and beliefs.”³ In other words, what determines the way a believer chooses to interact with the world is based on what he believes to be fundamentally true. This lens through which he looks at all of life is often referred to as a “worldview.” Philip Graham Ryken gives this definition: “Our worldview is what we presuppose. It is our way of looking at life, our interpretation of the universe, the orientation of our soul.”⁴ Albert Wolters defines it more broadly as “the comprehensive framework of one’s basic beliefs about things.”⁵ Therefore, a carefully thought out and defined worldview is necessary to answer the question of what it means to live “in the world but not of the world.”

A study of church history demonstrates that the proper relationship of Christianity (and the Christian) to culture is a complex problem. A plethora of answers have been proposed from numerous traditions, and the pendulum has swung back and forth from one extreme to the other throughout the centuries, from total separation to complete validation. Beginning with Abraham Kuyper’s famous Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898, the Dutch Calvinist tradition has been most well known for its robust “world-and-life view” and its answer to this enduring problem.⁶ While much has been written recently regarding this particular topic, less research has been published specifically

³ J. Mark Bertrand, *Rethinking Worldview: Learning to Live, Think, and Speak in This World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 131.

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *What is the Christian Worldview? Basics of the Reformed Faith* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006), 7.

⁵ Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 2.

⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931).

addressing the theological foundations which undergird it, such as predestination, the goodness of creation, total depravity, the cultural mandate, the antithesis, and common grace. These doctrines are the basis upon which a Calvinistic world-and-life view are built. A shift away from any of them would necessarily have an effect on the way one views the fundamental relation of man to the world, and thereby how he or she seeks to engage the culture.

This reality can be seen in the Dutch Calvinist tradition in America leading up to the First World War. Despite the fact that the whole community subscribed to the same historic confessions - the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism - there was conflict over a number of specific cultural issues. For example, different groups within the community disagreed over political views, Prohibition, labor unions, and women's suffrage.⁷ Doctrinal agreement on a comprehensive level did not ensure, or even demand, uniformity on how they sought to live in their cultural context.

In his book *Center Church*, Tim Keller explains how this is possible. He argues that between one's doctrinal foundation, which answers the question "What do I believe?", and one's ministry practices, which answers the question "What do I do?", is a category called theological vision. This "middleware" layer answers the important, but often neglected, question "How do I see?". It recognizes the fact that the particular place and the particular time in history that God had ordained for a person to live needs to be taken into consideration (Acts 17:26). Ministry expressions and methods cannot simply be copied and pasted with no regard for contextual differences. Keller defines theological vision as "a faithful restatement

⁷ See James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 67-79.

of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history.”⁸ Developing an answer to the enduring problem of Christianity’s relationship to the world is an important part of “middleware.” It shapes how one puts one’s theological beliefs into practice.

Unfortunately, it is impossible for me in this paper to examine the topic of Christ and culture in a comprehensive way. It is simply too large and too complex. However, I do think that it is possible to explore one of the individual doctrines that forms the foundation of a Calvinistic world-and-life view. Coming to a conclusion on what one believes regarding the Cultural Mandate, for example, does not automatically solve the issue about how one should engage in local politics, but it is a step in the right direction.

The doctrine that has been arguably the most divisive, as well as the most influential to generate differing answers to Christianity’s relationship to culture, is the doctrine of common grace. This was especially true of the Dutch Reformed community in the United States during the twentieth century, a period in which this small immigrant population experienced the tragedy of two world wars while wrestling with the issue of Americanization. Therefore, I propose to compare and contrast the views of three representative theologians in the Dutch Calvinist tradition to show that the development of the doctrine of common grace was significantly influenced by the experiences and acculturation of the Dutch Reformed community in America.

My desire in examining this specific doctrine in this particular Protestant tradition is not only to draw theological conclusions, but also some methodological ones. I thoroughly

⁸ Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 19.

believe that understanding the doctrine of common grace, which undergirds one's worldview and informs one's answer to the problem of Christianity's relationship to culture, is vital so that one may then develop consistent, biblical, and properly contextualized expressions of both gospel ministry and cultural engagement. At the same time, however, I also believe that exploring the multiplicity of opinions on this singular doctrine in the American Dutch Calvinist tradition will shed some light on how we ought to approach the enduring problem of Christ and culture in the twenty-first century.

A number of limitations to this study should be mentioned at this point. Due to the length of the paper, it was not possible to evaluate and compare more than these three scholars. Many others could have been chosen, such as Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhof, both of whom affirm the doctrine of common grace, or Klaas Schilder and Herman Hoeksema, who deny it. I chose to compare and contrast the views of Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and Richard Mouw for three specific reasons. First, each of them published a book that focused specifically on the topic and regularly wrote about it other works. Second, their combined academic careers span the entire twentieth century. Third, all three of these scholars attempt, with varying degrees of success, to hold the doctrine of common grace and the antithesis in tension. Their views all represent the middle section of the spectrum rather than either of the polarized ends.

Finally, I should be transparent about my own presuppositions and goals for this study. First, I am a theological mutt. I have a degree from a Baptist University and will soon have one from a Presbyterian Seminary. I have previously served on staff at a large contemporary, evangelical church in the suburban South, and have spent the past year at a

small, Reformed church in the urban Northeast. Second, I tend to see pendulum swinging as a paradigm for everything, especially when looked at from a historical perspective. Third, I have a tendency to value balance and humility, over rigid dogmatism. Fourth, I am part of a generation that typically views the world positively and is optimistic about the possibility of transforming culture.

I freely admit that I am deeply influenced by each of these presuppositions, which, in many ways, is what I hope to demonstrate in this paper. Like all of us, Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and Richard Mouw did not theologize or write about the doctrine of common grace in a vacuum. These three men each lived in a particular place at a particular time in history. Their doctrines of common grace were influenced by their present covenant communities, impacted by their personal biases, and contextualized to address the modern issues of their generations. My goal for this study is similar to what Herman Bavinck once told his students: “I do not ask that you solve the problem, but I ask that you begin to posit it clearly.”⁹ I cannot begin to offer a final solution to the enduring problem of Christianity’s relationship to culture. However, I can endeavor “to posit it clearly” by exploring one doctrine that underlies it within one specific Protestant tradition, namely the doctrine of common grace in Dutch Calvinism.

Review of Literature

As I mentioned earlier, there is a lot of published material dealing with the nature of the relationship between Christianity and the broader culture. The most famous book is H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, in which he identifies five separate answers to the

⁹ Quoted in Bastian Kruithof, “Bavinck Points the Way,” *Reformed Journal* 6 (1956): 16.

enduring problem that have traditionally been given by Christians throughout the centuries: (1) Christ against culture, (2) Christ of culture, (3) Christ above culture, (4) Christ and culture in paradox, and (5) Christ the transformer of culture. Although Niebuhr concludes that his examination is “inconclusive” and “could be indefinitely extended,” he clearly favors one of the median views, especially the final one. Years later, he wrote, “I still believe that reformation is a permanent movement, that *metanoia* is the continuous demand made on us in historical life. The immediate reformation of the church that I pray for, look for and want to work for in the time that may remain for me is its reformation not now by separation from the world but by a new entrance into it without conformity to it.”¹⁰

Every book on the topic on Christ and culture over the last fifty years critiques, interacts, or heavily draws from Niebuhr’s work. There are far too many to mention, but recent ones include D. A. Carson’s *Christ and Culture Revisited*, which attempts to define and reframe the problem, and Craig Carter’s *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, which puts forward a post-Christendom, anabaptist view. Tim Keller’s *Center Church*, which I already referenced above, is not technically a scholarly work. It is actually an expanded and polished version of the Redeemer City to City church planting manual. Keller is a Presbyterian minister in New York City who writes frequently about gospel contextualization, mission, and cultural engagement. His discussion of theological vision in the introductory chapter not only sets the table for the remainder of the book, but offers a compelling paradigm for examining the enduring problem. A recent scholarly work on Christ and culture that Keller

¹⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative,” *The Christian Century* 77 (1960): 250, quoted in Jonathan Armstrong, “The Church and the World in Perspective: The Formation of H. Richard Niebuhr’s Ethical Paradigm,” *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 116.

frequently recommends is James Hunter's *To Change the World*, in which Hunter critiques a number of popular approaches of Christian cultural engagement in America and gives his own proposal. Finally, a modern, practical book from an evangelical who says that he had benefited "the most" from Reformed thinkers, including Kuyper, is Andy Crouch's *Culture Making*.

There are two fairly recent books on worldview from a Reformed perspective that also touch on the issue of Christianity's relationship to culture in some helpful ways. Henry Van Til's *A Calvinistic Concept of Culture* is a chronological orientation to these topics. He examines the thought of Calvin, Kuyper, and Schilder, and then discusses some basic concepts that undergird a Calvinistic world-and-life view. Albert Wolters' *Creation Regained* is an redemptive-historical presentation of a biblical worldview that offers a few practical thoughts in the final chapter on personal and societal renewal from a Creation Order perspective.

James Bratt's comprehensive *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* offers a unique perspective on the topic of Christ and culture, as well as the doctrine of common grace. His work is a historical look at the development of Dutch Calvinism in America from the mid-1800s through the 1970s. He systematically makes his way from the Seceder movement in the Netherlands and the influence of Neo-Calvinism on Reformed theology to the controversies that plagued the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the impact of the American evangelical movement on the Dutch community. Along the way, he explores the impact of common grace and how they wrestled with Americanization.

There is a noticeable lack of scholarly material available on common grace. The majority of the books and articles that focus exclusively on the doctrine are primary sources by individual authors and works that directly interact with them. Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*, which I already mentioned above, is the foremost place where he unpacks his ideas regarding Calvinism as a comprehensive world-and-life view. His "Common Grace" in Bratt's *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* is the primary source in English for Kuyper's doctrine of common grace. The recently published edition of Cornelius Van Til's *Common Grace and the Gospel* is a collection of his works on the doctrine in one volume, and is the only place one needs to consult as a primary source. However, there are a number of articles by various scholars that are helpful to understand Van Til's sometimes difficult language, such as John Frame's discussion of common grace in his *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*. As a former student, Frame deeply respects and adopts a large amount of Van Til's theology, but is not afraid to critique and disagree with him. Richard Mouw's *He Shines in All That's Fair* is the predominant source for his views on common grace, though he has written several articles on Christianity's relationship to culture and societal renewal in which he address common grace. David Engelsma's *Common Grace Revisited* is also worth reading, since he interacts directly with Mouw and represents an entirely different stream of thought on the doctrine.

Preview of Argument

The rest of this paper will roughly follow the process of an NFL television commentator examining an instant replay to determine whether or not a receiver has

possession of a catch. He starts with a wide angle shot of the field to get a broad picture of the entire play, noting where the receiver is in relation to the first down marker, goal line, and other players. Next, he zooms in for a slow motion, close up to carefully examine the receiver's hands under the ball, elbow touching the ground, and feet tiptoeing down the sideline. After that, the commentator will zoom back out just a bit to see the movements of the whole receiver and draw a conclusion about the nature of the catch. Finally, he will return to the original camera angle and make some comments on the result of the play and what the offense needs to do in light of this.

In chapter two, I will lay out the basic elements of a Calvinistic world-and-life view, focusing mainly on the third fundamental relation of human life, namely man's relation to the world. The purpose of this section is to see how the doctrine of common grace fits into the larger framework of Reformed theology.

In chapter three, I will closely examine and compare the individual perspectives of Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and Richard Mouw. The purpose of this section is to grasp each scholar's unique understanding of common grace and to observe the similarities and differences between how each communicates the doctrine.

In chapter four, I will briefly assess the views of all three men, especially in light of the historical events in which they found themselves. The purpose of this section is to evaluate how their perspectives regarding the doctrine of common grace were influenced by unique the situation of twentieth century American Dutch Calvinism.

In chapter five, I will draw some conclusions and offer a few practical takeaways based on our examination. The purpose of this section is to show that this doctrine does more

than simply undergird one's theological vision or serve as an anonymous brick in the foundation of one's answer to the enduring problem of Christianity's relationship to culture. It has a life all its own and is extremely relevant to the followers of Jesus. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate that the development of common grace in the Dutch Calvinist tradition has much to teach us.

CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPING A CALVINISTIC WORLDVIEW

In the opening pages of his book, Henry Van Til¹ makes this statement: “Calvinism furnished us with the only theology of culture that is truly relevant for the world in which we live, because it is the true theology of the Word.”² This is a bold claim worth contemplating. This section will examine, then, how a Calvinistic worldview does in fact provide the believer with a proper biblical understanding of his relationship with and responsibility to the world in which he lives. Along the way, we will see where and how the doctrine of common grace fits into a Calvinistic world-and-life view.

Emphases of Reformed Theology

However, before examining some of these foundational doctrines, it is important first to define the distinctiveness of Reformed theology more generally. Van Til describes what sets Calvinism apart this way:

Calvinism as a biblical system of thought does not differ in kind from other forms of evangelical, theistic interpretation of God’s special revelation, but the difference is one of degree and emphasis. Calvinism professes to be more thoroughly and consistently oriented to the special revelation of God. It also takes more seriously the doctrine of the noetic effects of sin; it is very dubious about man’s reason as a

¹ Throughout this paper, I will be frequently referencing and quoting from two different Van Tils. One is Cornelius Van Til, whose doctrine of common grace will be explored in the next chapter. The other is Henry Van Til, Cornelius’ nephew. In this chapter, “Van Til” will refer to Henry, whereas “Van Til” in subsequent chapters will refer to Cornelius (unless otherwise indicated).

² Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), xvii.

valid and effective instrument for attaining truth apart from the enlightenment of the Spirit and the revelation in Jesus Christ.³

In other words, the theological system that developed from the mind of John Calvin and his followers is thoroughly in line with the rest of Protestantism regarding the basic tenets of the faith, such as justification by faith alone in Christ alone. The differences surface in Calvin's emphasis on Scripture over human reason, and on the sovereignty of God above all things.

Scripture

For John Calvin, Scripture is the only means by which men can acquire a knowledge of God unto salvation. To be sure, God does actively make himself known through the cosmos, as the Apostle Paul states. Men are without excuse because "his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20), but this general revelation is not sufficient. Special revelation is needed. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin makes this clear. He says that "the human mind because of its feebleness can in no way attain to God unless it be aided and assisted by his Sacred Word" and without it, men "stagger about in vanity and error."⁴ Additionally, man's reason is affected by sin, and must be corrected by Scripture:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read

³ Ibid., 48.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster, 1960), 74.

distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.⁵

Our need of Scripture, then, is directly related to the reality of the Fall and sin in the world.

Abraham Kuyper, utilizing similar language to Calvin, writes:

When there are no mists to hide the majesty of the divine light from our eyes, what need is there then for a lamp unto the feet, or a light upon the path? But when history, experience and consciousness all unite in stating the fact that the pure and full light of Heaven *has* disappeared, and that we are groping about in the dark, then, a different, or if you will, an artificial light *must* be kindled for us, - and such a light God has kindled for us in His Holy Word.⁶

The Christian must rely upon the special revelation of God in Scripture to know him truly and comprehend the good news about Jesus.

Furthermore, Scripture is necessary for the believer to formulate a proper worldview. In other words, the Word of God is sufficient not only to bring about justification by faith, but to provide a comprehensive framework for how one views all of life. Van Til affirms this, saying, “The Calvinist . . . does not take the narrow view that Scripture merely reveals the way of salvation from sin. For him the Bible is also his source-book as a cultural creature. It delineates the guiding principles for his whole being.”⁷ Scripture is relevant and regulative for all of life, not just those areas that are traditionally thought of as “sacred.” Wolters puts it this way: “In a certain sense the plea being made here for a biblical worldview is simply an appeal to the believer to take the Bible and its teaching seriously for the totality of our

⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 57.

⁷ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 161.

civilization *right now* and not to relegate it to some optional area called ‘religion.’”⁸ This is of utmost importance, and has major implications for the Calvinistic worldview.

The Sovereignty of God

At the beginning of his epistle to the Colossians, Paul declares the preeminence of Christ and the sovereignty of God: “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). God, as creator and sustainer of all things, is Lord over all. This reality is what caused Abraham Kuyper to make this famous statement in 1880 in his inaugural lecture at the Free University of Amsterdam: “There is not an inch in the whole area of human existence of which Christ, the sovereign of all does not cry, ‘It is Mine.’”⁹ This truth is foundational for the Calvinistic concept of culture.

If God is sovereign over all of life, then everything we do as creatures is sacred. Nothing is secular. The activities of daily life should not be compartmentalized, as they so often are. A dualistic conception of life is unhealthy and harmful. Van Til explains the absurdity of trying to define and keep separate the secular and sacred realms:

It is certainly folly for God’s people to think that they can live in two separate worlds, one for their religious life and devotional exercises, and the other usurping all other time, energy, money—an area in which the priests of Secularism are calling the numbers. One cannot keep on evangelizing the world without interfering with the world’s culture. . . . To divide life into areas of sacred and secular, letting our devotions take care of the former while becoming secular reformers during the week, is to fail to understand the true end of man.¹⁰

⁸ Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 9.

⁹ *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring*, 3d ed. (Kampen, 1930), 32, quoted in Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 117.

¹⁰ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 43-44.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This duty is carried out wherever we live, work, and play. All of these places are part of creation and under the Lordship of God. Therefore, every activity done there is sacred. On this point, Van Til says, “God’s sovereignty is the atmosphere in which the Calvinist lives, the milieu in which he acts as a cultural being.”¹¹ There is much more to be said regarding this responsibility and what it looks like later on. At this point, it is sufficient to note that the sovereignty of God is the foundation of Reformed theology and essential for a Calvinistic worldview.

Three Fundamental Relations

In his *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kuyper argues “that Calvinism is not a partial, nor was a merely temporary phenomenon, but is such an all-embracing system of principles, as, rooted in the past, is able to strengthen us in the present and to fill us with confidence for the future.”¹² In other words, Calvinism is able to provide the believer with a cohesive world-and-life view that is just as comprehensive as other major worldviews, such as Paganism, Islam, Romanism, and Modernism. Kuyper proves his point by examining what he considers to be the necessary conditions for any life system, proposing that there are three fundamental relations to all human life which every worldview must answer: man’s relation to God, man’s relation to man, and man’s relation to the world.

¹¹ Ibid., 53.

¹² Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 19.

Man to God

Calvinism answers this question in similar fashion with the rest of the Protestant Reformation. Because of the person and work of Jesus Christ, our great high Priest, we are able to have direct access to God without a human mediator (c.f. Heb 4:14-16). On this point, Kuyper says that Calvinism “proclaims the exalted thought that, although standing in high majesty above the creature, God enters *into immediate fellowship with the creature*, as God the Holy Spirit.”¹³ The difference from much of evangelicalism comes from Calvin’s understanding of the doctrine of predestination and election. The elect are chosen, not based on human merit or worth, but unconditionally by God’s sovereign choice “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4). Calvin defines predestination as “God’s eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others.”¹⁴ Election was “not for the sake of separating man from man, nor in the interest of personal pride, but in order to guarantee from eternity to eternity, to our inner self, a direct and immediate communion with the Living God.”¹⁵ The concept of man’s relation to God being from eternity past to eternity present is unique to Calvinism alone.

Man to Man

This question is answered fundamentally by the truth that God has made man in his own image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27). Therefore, as every man is equal under God, man

¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 926.

¹⁵ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 21.

stands side by side with other men as equals. The Apostle Paul affirms this in reference to our justification: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Kuyper, in similar terms, says, “all men or women, rich or poor, weak or strong, dull or talented, as creatures of God, and lost sinners, have no claim whatsoever to lord over one another, and . . . we stand as equals before God, and consequently equal man to man.”¹⁶ Therefore, Calvinism recognizes human dignity and condemns, for example, racial inequality and sexism. This does not mean, however, that authority or differentiation among people is inherently evil. Scripture clearly teaches that God appoints rulers and authorities to exercise his judgment in society (Rom 13:1-7), and husbands to be head of their wives, as Christ is head of the Church (Eph 5:22-33). Thus, Kuyper says, “we cannot recognize any distinction among men, save such as has been imposed by God himself.”¹⁷ Because of the image of God, every human being has inherent worth and is on equal ground with other people.

Man to World

This third relation, man to the world, is the most complex of the three fundamental relations to answer. However, it is one that most distinguishes a Reformed world-and-life view from the rest of the branches of the Reformation, most notably the third branch, the Anabaptists, who answered this question completely opposite of Calvinism. Furthermore, it is this relation that directly addresses the Christian’s paradox of being “in the world, but not

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of the world” that began this paper. To answer this question, we will need to begin with doctrine of creation and proceed through the story of redemption.

Creation

Scripture says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). It is crucial to recognize the goodness of creation, that “creation before and apart from sin is wholly and unambiguously *good*.”¹⁸ Kuyper writes, “Cosmical life has regained its worth not at the expense of things eternal, but by virtue of its capacity as God’s handiwork and as a revelation of God’s attributes.”¹⁹ The entire creation is a gift from God to man. Therefore, no aspect of God’s creation, apart from what sin has infected, should be regarded as sinful. Paul made this exact point clear to Timothy: “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim 4:4), and that God “richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). This was one of the core heresies of Gnosticism, which denied the goodness of creation and taught that the natural world is fundamentally bad. Van Til goes even further saying that “every form of ascetic denial of nature as evil in itself is a perversion of the truth that God is creator of heaven and earth and that Christ is Lord over all.”²⁰ In other words, to call any aspect of creation inherently evil is to deny God as creator of that which is good.

¹⁸ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 48.

¹⁹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 120.

²⁰ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 194.

This truth has massive practical implications for the believer. No part of creation given by God should be regarded as sinful and rejected outright. For example, the gift of sexual relations between a husband and a wife is good and meant to be enjoyed. Although it can be abused, and often is, in the form of fornication, homosexuality, and pornography, sex should not be considered evil. This was the mistake of Augustine and the Roman Catholic doctrine of concupiscence. Likewise, alcohol is a good gift from God and should not be labeled as sinful in itself. It was Solomon, who was given unparalleled wisdom (1 Kgs 3:12), that said, “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do” (Eccl 9:7). Furthermore, Paul gives this conclusion: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). John Calvin proposes moderation of God’s gifts rather than outright denial of them:

Surely ivory and gold and riches are good creations of God, permitted, indeed appointed, for men’s use by God’s providence. And we have never been forbidden to laugh, or to be filled, or to join new possessions to old or ancestral ones, or to delight in musical harmony, or to drink wine. True indeed. But where there is plenty, to wallow in delights, to gorge oneself, to intoxicate mind and heart with present pleasures and be always panting after new ones—such are very far removed from a lawful use of God’s gifts.²¹

All of the good things that we receive from God should be cherished and enjoyed to the praise of his glorious grace.

Not only was all of creation before the Fall declared to be good, but God also gave man a responsibility to work: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:28). Wolters suggests that the giving of this duty

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 841.

is the climax of creation: “Although God has withdrawn from the work of creation, he has put an image of himself on the earth with a mandate to continue.”²² This is the cultural mandate; the responsibility for mankind to continue God’s creative action by developing creation. Again, it is important to realize that this takes place before the fall. It is part of the goodness of Divine creation. Therefore, Van Til says, “The cultural urge, the will to rule and to have power is increased. This is not demonic, or satanic, but divine in origin.”²³

Furthermore, the cultural mandate is not a suggestion, but a command. Because of this, then, “renunciation of cultural participation for its own sake is always sinful.”²⁴ As his image bearers and representatives, God has given us this task. It is our job to carry it out. Ryken puts it this way: “We have a God-given responsibility to develop the possibilities of creation in ways that reveal our Maker’s praise, and thus to fill the whole earth with his glory. We are to do this in science, politics, business, sports, literature, film, and all the arts. It is not just one part of life that ought to glorify God, but all of life, in all its fullness. This is the way that things were meant to be.”²⁵ In the Garden, Adam, and therefore all humanity, was given the mandate to continue God’s creative work by developing culture.

Fall

Unfortunately, the creation was distorted by a catastrophic event, called the Fall. Scripture tells us that Adam and Eve were seduced by the serpent and transgressed the law of

²² Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 41.

²³ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁵ Phillip Graham Ryken, *What is the Christian Worldview?*, Basics of the Reformed Faith (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006), 24.

God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, they fell from their state of original righteousness and perfect communion with God. And as a consequence, God pronounced a curse, and “creation was subjected to futility” and placed in “bondage to corruption” (Rom 8:20-21). The original goodness of creation was spoiled. Paradise was lost. “As dirty water contaminates a clean pond, so the poisonous effects of the Fall have fouled every aspect of creation.”²⁶ The world is broken, not by God’s design, but because of the rebellion of humanity. Wolters comments on this perfectly: “wherever anything wrong exists in the world, anything we experience as antinormative, evil, distorted, or sick, there we meet the perversion of God’s good creation.”²⁷ The perversion that exists in the world today in all aspects of life, is not part of the original plan, but the result of sin.

The curse of the Fall is not upon the natural world only, but extends to humanity as well. Scripture teaches that the guilt of Adam was imputed to all his offspring: “by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners” (Rom 5:19). Every individual stands condemned as guilty before God, deserving death as punishment (Rom 3:23, 6:23). Furthermore, the very nature of man was thoroughly corrupted. Humanity became internally and externally evil so that “*every* intention of the thoughts of his heart was *only* evil *continually*” (Gen 6:5, emphasis mine). Totally depraved from birth, mankind can do no spiritual good.

At this point, it is imperative to affirm two important truths about the Fall and its extent. First, the goodness of original creation has not been completely destroyed. The world,

²⁶ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

as God intended it to be, is still good. Wolters states, “Sin neither abolishes nor becomes identified with creation. Creation and sin remain distinct, however closely they may be intertwined in our experience.”²⁸ It may be hard to grasp this at first, because creation is so thoroughly corrupted. Every aspect of the world that we encounter is mixed with evil. However, it is crucial to understand that this mixture is heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, meaning that the substances retain their original properties and can be seen, distinguished, and separated from one another.²⁹ The evil and corruption that has infiltrated this world is not mixed uniformly with the goodness of creation. This is a necessary distinction to make in order to have a proper understanding of our role in this fallen world.

Second, things are not as bad as they could be. This is where the concept of common grace enters into the picture, at least for those who accept the doctrine in some form. God has a generally favorable attitude towards all of his creatures, graciously providing for their every need (Psalm 103). This divine disposition includes both the elect and the reprobate, which Jesus seems to affirm when he comments on the fact that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45). As a result of common grace, God graciously restrains the effects of sin in the life of the individual and society as a whole. This does not mean that God has reduced sin to a minimum, but rather that he prevents the extreme sinfulness of which the human heart is capable.³⁰ This is what Calvin says in the midst of his discussion about man’s corrupt nature:

²⁸ Ibid., 57.

²⁹ On this point, think about the difference between the air we breathe (a mixture of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, etc) and a fruit salad.

³⁰ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 119.

But here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God's grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly. For if the Lord gave loose rein to the mind of each man to run riot in his lusts, there would doubtless be no one who would not show that, in fact, every evil thing for which Paul condemns all nature is most truly to be met in himself. . . . Thus, God, by his providence, bridles the perversity of nature, that it may not break forth into action.³¹

It is this grace, then, that also makes it possible for the unregenerate man to discover truth and perform good deeds that are commendable and in harmony with the law of God. This is commonly referred to as "civil righteousness," which Berkhof defines as "that which is right in civil or natural affairs, in distinction from that which is right in religious matters."³² The original goodness of creation remains in this fallen and broken world because of common grace.

Finally, if all that was "very good" before the fall has not been wiped out by sin, but persists, then the cultural mandate has not been abolished. The urge to create, which mankind has received from God, is innate. It comes naturally to us as God's image bearers, both before and after the Fall. Therefore, mankind will continue to create culture and attempt to "bring all things in submission" (Gen 1:28). Van Til affirms this, saying that "man has not lost his cultural urge, his instinct to rule, his love of power, his ability to form and to mould matter after his will. He continues to multiply, to replenish the earth with his kind; he loves to work to exercise dominion over the works of God."³³ However, this activity has become distorted due to the effects of sin. Creating culture has become the end, instead of a means to an end, namely glorifying God. Mankind hijacked the cultural mandate and "exchanged the

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 292-293.

³² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 443.

³³ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 58.

truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25). Therefore, Van Til, continuing on, says, “It is better to say that man is now producing a godless culture, that he has apostatized in his cultural striving.”³⁴ In other words, the cultural mandate is still being fulfilled, but fallen man is creating culture for his own glory.

Redemption

It was in the midst of this broken and fallen creation that Jesus came. In a world that desperately needed a remedy “the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Scripture tells us that we are justified, made right, with God by faith, through the substitutionary death of Jesus, which paid the penalty for our original sin and satisfied the wrath of God. Those who believe have been forgiven, redeemed, and reconciled to God, but justification is only the beginning of salvation. Jesus wants to do more than just offer personal salvation for individual people. The empty tomb makes this clear, as Herman Bavinck writes: “The bodily resurrection of Christ is the decisive proof that Christianity is not hostile to anything human or natural but only desires to save creation from all that is sinful and to sanctify it perfectly unto God.”³⁵

God’s plan of redemption has a cosmic purpose. “Redemption is not separate from creation, therefore. It is the very world that God once made—now lost and fallen in sin—that God has a purpose to redeem.”³⁶ Kuyper agrees. He writes, “the final outcome of the future,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *De Offerande des Lofs*, 74, quoted in Bastian Kruitof, “The Christian and the World According to Bavinck,” *Reformed Journal* 6 (1956): 19.

³⁶ Ryken, *What is the Christian Worldview?*, 35.

foreshadowed in the H. Scriptures, is not the merely spiritual existence of saved souls, but *the restoration of the entire cosmos*, when God will be all in all under the renewed heaven on the renewed earth.”³⁷ Not only do the elect receive eternal life, but their physical bodies will be transformed “to be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21), and creation itself “will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). The salvation that the elect have experienced now is only the firstfruits of what is to come on the Last Day, namely the re-creation of all things.

In this period between Christ’s death and his second coming, redemption is “already” but “not yet.” The work of salvation has been initiated, but not yet consummated. It has started, but will not end until he returns again. The kingdom of God that John the Baptist proclaimed has been established (Mark 1:15). Wolters says, regarding this, “In Jesus Christ we witness the long-awaited vindication and effect demonstration of God’s kingship in the world. The coming of Christ is the climax of the whole history of redemption as recorded in the Scriptures. The rightful king has established a beachhead in his territory and calls on his subjects to press his claims ever farther in creation.”³⁸ During this interim period, Christians do more than simply wait. If God, through Christ, is going “to reconcile to himself all things” (Col 1:20) and this ministry of reconciliation has been given to us (2 Cor 5:18), then the elect have a redemptive role to play in this world. The followers of Jesus have a responsibility to join in the effort to renew creation to its original goodness for the glory of God. Just as we were called to continue to creative work of the Father in the original goodness of the garden,

³⁷ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 119.

³⁸ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 74.

so are we called to continue the salvific work of the Son in the brokenness of this fallen world. Cultural engagement is a necessary implication of the Gospel.³⁹

As the children of God endeavor to accomplish this task, however, they will experience the enmity that God set between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen 3:15). This is the antithesis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. A Calvinistic world-and-life view must recognize the battle that rages. “What distinguishes a reformational worldview is its understanding of the radical and universal import of both sin and redemption. There is something totalitarian about the claims of both Satan and Christ: nothing in all of creation is neutral in the sense that it is untouched by the dispute between these two great adversaries.”⁴⁰ The elect of God are not called to react to the antithesis by fleeing from the world, but by remaining in it and fulfilling the role they have providentially been given. The antithesis compels the followers of Jesus to be proactive rather than passive, to “fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim 6:12) as Paul told Timothy.

Van Til explains this well:

[T]he Christian has a cultural calling over against the world to testify against its godless character. There is always the danger that he will lose the proper perspective due to the pilgrim mind and the martyr complex that sometimes obsesses the disciples of Christ, because of the hatred of the world. But the life of the Christian is not simply undergoing something that must be endured, a burden to be borne, but is a holy calling.⁴¹

³⁹ I recognize that agreement with this statement, as well as the surrounding paragraphs, is dramatically affected by one’s view of the ends times. This paper contains neither the space nor the scope to examine eschatology or its impact on one’s thoughts on Christ and culture.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴¹ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 202.

Our part in this work of salvation is carried out wherever our vocations place us in the world. In his article on common grace, Bavinck writes, “We are to show our Christian faith first of all in the faithful performance of our earthly calling.”⁴² Every believer has a calling, and none of them are unimportant. Therefore, followers of Jesus should not seek to escape their vocations, but rather work diligently and faithfully at them. Calvin argues that “no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.”⁴³ Even the lowliest daily activities can be done for the glory of God.

Believers can have confidence in this calling, because the end of the story has already been written. Satan will be defeated and redemption will be accomplished. When Christ returns, he will “put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor 15:25) and establish a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). Wolters summarizes it this way: “The first coming establishes his foothold in creation, while the second coming accomplishes the complete victory of his sovereignty.”⁴⁴ On that day, creation will be fully restored.

⁴² Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. R. C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 62.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 725.

⁴⁴ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 76.

CHAPTER 3

EXPLORING COMMON GRACE IN THE DUTCH CALVINIST TRADITION

Having laid out the basic tenets of a Calvinistic world-and-life view, it is time to turn our attention specifically to common grace. This doctrine is an interesting one. The question that common grace answers enters our hearts and minds not so much from biblical exegesis as it does from cultural exegesis. Kuyper notes, “It is thus a fact, that your dogma of total depravity by sin does not always tally with your experiences in life.”¹ In other words, we have all realized that those who do not profess the name of Jesus are often nice people! They love their families. Their marriages don’t always end in divorce. They care about their communities and work hard to make the world a better place to live. Despite the fact that they don’t follow Jesus, unbelievers create good music, write beautiful poetry, and paint great works of art. They are able to harvest crops, discover scientific truths, and build skyscrapers. Berkhof summarizes it this way: “The origin of the doctrine of common grace was occasioned by the fact that there is in the world, alongside of the course of the Christian life with all its blessings, a natural course of life, which is not redemptive and yet exhibits many traces of the true, the good, and the beautiful.”² This observation leads us to ask, “How can

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 122.

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 432.

this be the case?” We now proceed to look at how three Dutch Calvinist theologians answer that question.

An Examination of Their Views

As we now zoom in to consider the individual perspectives of Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and Richard Mouw on the doctrine of common grace, we will attempt to concisely answer three main questions under each scholar. First, what was his motivation for writing about common grace? What problem was this scholar attempting to accomplish with this doctrine? Second, what was his concept of common grace, especially as it relates to the three points accepted by the 1924 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church?³ Third, what is the relationship between common grace and special grace?

Abraham Kuyper

The first view to be considered is that of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), the famous pastor, theologian, newspaper editor, university founder, party leader, and politician. Immediately before being elected Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Kuyper wrote series of articles on the doctrine of common grace over a six year span (September 1895 through July 1901) in *De Haraut* that were latter compiled into the massive, three volume *De Gemeene Gratie*.⁴ It has often been noted that he was not the first to bring the doctrine of common grace back into the light after a period of hiding. That honor must be given to Herman

³ The three points are: (1) God has a favorable attitude towards his creatures in general, (2) God restrains sin in individuals and in society, and (3) God enables the unregenerate to perform “civic good” (For full text, see Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2d ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint [Phillipsburg: P&R: 2015], 26-30).

⁴ Leiden: Donner, 1902-1904; See also “Common Grace,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1998), 165-166.

Bavinck.⁵ However, it is Abraham Kuyper who must be recognized as the one who gave the Reformed community the most comprehensive work on the subject and did the most to develop the doctrine since the period of the Reformation and the works of John Calvin.⁶

Motivation

Contrary to what some accuse him doing, Kuyper does not wish simply to baptize the things of this world or give “an uncritical appreciation of the neutral culture of unbelievers.”⁷ Rather, his goal was to bring every aspect of our earthly experience under the reign of King Jesus. He writes, “the doctrine of common grace proceeds directly from the Sovereignty of the Lord which is ever the root conviction of all Reformed thinking. If God is sovereign, then his Lordship *must* remain over *all* life and cannot be closed up within church walls or Christian circles.”⁸ More specifically, Kuyper saw his doctrine of common grace as a solution to the Roman Catholic division of nature and grace, which segregated the life of a believer.⁹ Regarding this division in Kuyper’s day, Bratt writes, “Quite simply the Reformed needed to purge themselves of their ‘pietistic dualisms,’ their separation of Sunday from the workweek, of their spiritual from the physical - in theological terms, of nature from grace.”¹⁰ Against this viewpoint, Kuyper argued that the grace of God was present everywhere and

⁵ *Algemeene Genade*, 1894.

⁶ See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 434; James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 31; H. Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Smither, 1928), i.

⁷ Cf. his opposition to card playing, dancing, and going to the theatre (Kuyper, *Lectures*, 73-77).

⁸ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 166.

⁹ Henry VanderKam, “Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 2 (1986): 58.

¹⁰ Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 16.

could not be confined, just as God himself cannot be restricted to “temples made by man” (Acts 17:24). “You cannot see grace in all its riches if you do not perceive how its tiny roots and fibers everywhere penetrate into the joints and cracks of the life of nature.”¹¹

Kuyper believed that the reality of Christ’s lordship demanded a doctrine of grace that extended beyond the walls of a church building on Sunday morning. He longed to see Christianity influence and infiltrate every part of Dutch society:

One desire has been the ruling passion of my life. One high motive has acted like a spur upon my mind and soul. And sooner than that I should seek escape from the sacred necessity that is laid upon me, let the breath of life fail me. If it is this: That in spite of all worldly opposition, God’s holy ordinances shall be established again in the home, in the school and in the State for the good of the people; to carve as it were into the conscience of the nation the ordinances of the Lord, to which Bible and Creation bear witness, until the nation pays homage again to God.¹²

For Abraham Kuyper, the doctrine of common grace begins with and operates under the banner of the kingship of Christ.

Concept

Although the decision of the 1924 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church occurred after Kuyper’s death, the three points that were accepted in Kalamazoo, Michigan have been at the center of the discussion of common grace ever since. Therefore, we will use them, albeit anachronistically, as a guide for to examine Kuyper’s conception of common grace. Regarding the first point, namely that God has a positive disposition towards the non-elect, Kuyper is strangely silent. We cannot draw the conclusion that he did not believe this point, which would be a simple logical fallacy. It seems likely that Kuyper would agree with this

¹¹ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 173.

¹² Quoted in Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, iii.

statement based on his affirmation of the other points, but we cannot be certain. At the very least, we can be sure that this divine attitude of general favor towards the reprobate was not his primary concern.

Kuyper would wholeheartedly affirm both the second and third points. In this writings, he consistently identifies two distinct operations of common grace. First, there is a negative and constant function in which God “restrains the curse of nature and the sin of the human heart.”¹³ This aspect of common grace holds back or blocks the effects of sin. “Where evil does not come to the surface, or does not manifest itself in all its hideousness, we do not owe it to the fact that our nature is not so deeply corrupt, but to God alone, Who by His ‘common grace’ hinders the bursting forth of the flames from the smoking fire.”¹⁴ In other words, things are not as bad as they could be despite the fact that “every intention” of man’s heart is “only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). Not all unregenerate persons are nasty people, because the destructive forces of sin have been temporarily stopped or arrested.

Second, there is a positive and progressive function in which God “equips human life ever more thoroughly against suffering, and internally brings it to richer and fuller development.”¹⁵ Kuyper subdivides this aspect of common grace further. There is an interior function which produces, “civic virtue, a dense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life.”¹⁶ Despite the consequences of the Fall, common

¹³ Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*, 1:602, quoted in Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 24.

¹⁴ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 124.

¹⁵ Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*, 1:602, quoted in Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 24.

¹⁶ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 181.

grace has preserved within mankind a sense of God and morality, which results in the ability of the unregenerate to do “civic good”-actions that are good, right, and true, but not morally praiseworthy. Kuyper notes, “Common grace has thus led to the result that an unregenerate sinner may captivate and attract us by much that is lovely and full of energy.”¹⁷ Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction to this section, experience shows us that the reprobate are not only not as bad as they could be, but they also excel in many things.

In addition to this, there is also an exterior function to the positive aspect of common grace, which is seen “when human power over nature increases, when invention upon invention enriches life, when international communication is improved, the arts flourish, the sciences increase our understanding, the conveniences and joys of life multiply, all expressions of life become more vital and radiant, forms become more refined, and the general image of life becomes more winsome.”¹⁸ This function has to do with the progression of history and civilization. The Cultural Mandate given in the garden (Gen 1:28) remains normative.¹⁹ “The fundamental creation ordinance given before the fall, that humans would achieve dominion over all of nature thanks to ‘common grace,’ is still realized *after* the fall.”²⁰ Humanity works and seeks to develop and maintain the cosmos, because common grace has preserved it. Culture is a gift of common grace. Henry Van Til explains Kuyper’s point here, writing that “without the common grace of God, no culture would have been forthcoming. The world, because of sin, would have been destroyed if the common grace of

¹⁷ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 124.

¹⁸ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 181.

¹⁹ See Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 130.

²⁰ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 179

God had not intervened. As such, common grace is the foundation of culture, since God's great plan for creation is achieved through common grace."²¹

Special Grace

A number of things should be noted about the relationship between common grace and special grace in Kuyper's thought. First, the doctrine of common grace is specifically connected to Jesus. The first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians says that Jesus is the source and ruler of creation, and therefore also of common grace: He is "the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15-17).²² However, Kuyper stops here. He does not specifically connect the doctrine to the atoning work of Christ.

Second, common grace and special grace are not the same thing. Kuyper makes a clear distinction between what each of them do and do not accomplish. Common grace does not destroy the curse of sin, while saving grace does:

Regeneration, the gift of special grace, removes the cancer of sin by taking out its root. In place of sin it gives the power of eternal life. Common Grace doesn't do anything like it. It holds down but doesn't quench. It takes but doesn't change the nature. It keeps back and holds in leash, but as soon as the restraint is removed, the evil races forth. It trims the shoot but doesn't heal the root. The wickedness of man's ego is kept but it prevents the full fruition of wickedness. It is a limiting, a restraining, a hindering power which slows and brings to a halt.²³

²¹ Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 118.

²² See Kuyper, "Common Grace," 186

²³ Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*, 1:51, quoted in VanderKam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," 60.

Common grace and special grace are two branches of the same tree. They are distinct, but there is no dichotomy between them. In fact, Kuyper teaches that they often intermingle: “They are not each enclosed within the walls of its own terrain. They work together in the same terrain. They, therefore, come in touch with each other. They meet each other in every plain of life.”²⁴

Third, God’s eternal decrees of election and reprobation do not have any effect on common grace. Kuyper cannot make this position any more clear when he writes, “The social side of man’s creation in God’s image has nothing to do with salvation nor in any way with each person’s state before God.”²⁵ In other words, the quantity and quality of common grace that the elect and reprobate receive is by means not affected by their eternal destiny. It “is extended to the whole of our human life.”²⁶ There is no distinction.

Fourth, common grace has a purpose in the plan of God that is independent from special grace. This is not to deny or diminish the foundational nature of common grace. This purpose is important as well. Kuyper writes, “special grace presupposes common grace. Without the latter the former cannot function.”²⁷ This might be made the most clear when one realizes that the negative, restraining operation of common grace secures a place for the Church to stand, to exist, in history.²⁸ If the world had been wiped out immediately after the Fall, there would be no geographical location to God to carry out the plan of redemption and

²⁴ Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*, 2:634, quoted in Jeremy Begbie, “Creation, Christ and Culture in Dutch Neo-Calvinism,” in *Christ in Our Place*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 25 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 118.

²⁵ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 178.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁸ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 125.

call out a people for himself. The point that Kuyper makes, however, is that the cultivation and preservation of God's good creation has meaning in and of itself apart from the plan of redemption. Kuyper writes:

Therefore, we must emphatically state that the interval of centuries that have passed since the fall is not a blank space in the plan of God. The ages lying behind us, by God's decree, must have a purpose and a goal, and that purpose can be understood only if we understand that the ongoing development of humanity is *contained in the plan of God*. It follows that the history of our race resulting from this development is not from Satan nor from man *but from God* and that all those who reject and fail to appreciate this development deny the work of God in history.²⁹

In other words, it pleases God to see the Cultural Mandate being carried out. The development of civilization exists for more than simply serving the purposes of special grace. This independent purpose of common grace is connected to Kuyper's view of eschatology. The salvation to come on the last day is for all of creation, not just humanity:

To put it in a nutshell, shall we imagine that all we need is a Reconciler of our soul or continue to confess that the Christ of God is the Savior of both soul and *body* and is the Re-creator not only of things in the invisible world but also of things that are visible and before our eyes? Does Christ have significance only for the *spiritual* realm or also for the *natural* and *visible* domain? Does the fact that he has overcome the world [John 16:33] mean that he will one day toss the world back into nothingness in order to keep alive only the souls of the elect, or does it mean that the world too will be his conquest, the trophy of his glory?³⁰

Here again, we see Kuyper's desire to magnify the grace of God. Salvation is about the redemption of all things, including nature, not just the elect. Moreover, the glorification of the cosmos will happen, in part, through cultural development. The contributions of man,

²⁹ Kuyper, "Common Grace," 175.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

including the reprobate, will carry over into eternity. This means that humanity, as an instrument of common grace, is a co-worker with God to accomplish His work in history.³¹

Fifth, special grace influences common grace indirectly through the ministries of the church and directly through regenerated followers of Jesus.³² In talking about terms like “a Christian nation” or “Christian art” Kuyper explains what he means: “The adjective ‘Christian’ therefore says nothing about the spiritual state of the inhabitants of such a country but only witnesses to the fact that public opinion, the general mind-set, the ruling ideas, the moral norms, the laws and customs there clearly betoken the influence of the Christian faith.” This, he says, happens when “special grace in the church and among believers exerted so strong a formative influence on common grace that common grace thereby attained its highest development.”³³ In other words, the followers of Jesus can positively influence culture. They have the ability to develop and restore the spheres of life in which they find themselves (such as politics, education, or medicine) to their original goodness.

Cornelius Van Til

The next view to be considered is that of Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987), the distinguished Westminster Seminary Professor. Although teaching his entire career at a Presbyterian school, Van Til’s connections to the Dutch Reformed community are many. He was born in Holland and immigrated at a young age with his parents to the Midwest, where he would attend both Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary. Receiving degrees

³¹ Ibid., 175; See also Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 119-121.

³² See Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 123; Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 190.

³³ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 190.

from the flagship schools of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) resulted in Van Til's appreciation for the work of Abraham Kuyper and the systematic theology of Herman Bavinck. At Princeton Theological Seminary, he was also deeply influenced by Geerhardus Vos, a fellow Dutch immigrant and son of the CRC who had also left Grand Rapids.³⁴

Motivation

Referring to the debates regarding the doctrine of common grace in the 1920's, Frame writes, "[Van Til] had friends on both sides of the controversy and he regretted the divisiveness of it. He sought in his writings to get beyond the standard positions on either side and to make some real progress in theological understanding."³⁵ Van Til did not particularly like the two polarized positions put forth by either the antithetical Calvinists, who denied the doctrine of common grace all together, or the positive Calvinists, who affirmed "a theory of common grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome."³⁶ He sought to develop a balanced "third way" by correcting and developing the traditional Kuyperian. In other words, his desire was to articulate a doctrine of common grace that took seriously the emphases of Scripture. Van Til did not want to (1) deny the antithesis that exists between the believer and the unbeliever or (2) rely too heavily on deductive logic, which leads one to think "abstractly."³⁷ He believed that both of these lead to a distorted view of common grace.

³⁴ Biographical information taken predominately from John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 19-24.

³⁵ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 216.

³⁶ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 168

³⁷ *Ibid.*, viii.

Concept

In his writings, Van Til affirms all three points of the 1924 Synod at Kalamazoo. First, God does have a general attitude of favor on the reprobate. This is due to the fact that common grace is “earlier,” rooted in God’s original relationship with Adam. As K. Scott Oliphint explains, “Because Adam is the representative of all mankind, God’s favorable attitude toward Adam in the garden entails his favorable attitude, representatively, toward all mankind. Thus, Van Til sees ‘commonness’ itself as having its roots in the creation of Adam, not simply as an individual man, but as our covenant head.”³⁸ In other words, God’s love for the human race stems solely from our solidarity in Adam. Common grace is “the continuation of the original status” of all mankind in the covenant head, who was made in the image of God, had knowledge of God, and received the cultural mandate.³⁹

However, when the fall occurs, humanity finds itself in a “mixed situation.” In addition to common grace, there is also now a “common wrath” on all mankind, as the Apostle Paul teaches, “one trespass led to condemnation for all men . . . by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners” (Rom 5:18-19). In other words, both the elect and the reprobate are under common grace *and* common wrath in Adam. This is important to recognize, because it is to this mixed human race that God provides certain good things indiscriminately. Gifts such as rain, sunshine, food, and drink show a favorable attitude on God’s part towards the non-elect. It is irrational to affirm that God gives good gifts to people while also denying that he has some kind of favorable disposition towards them. The action

³⁸ Ibid., xxviii.

³⁹ William D. Dennison, “Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 242.

of God and the attitude of God should not be divorced from one another, especially in a “mixed situation” like we are:

We must not separate the ‘facts’ of history, i.e., the manifestation both of God’s favor and of His wrath, from his *attitude* expressed in these facts. God is angry with those who are not yet but one day will be His people. To turn away His wrath from them He pours it out upon His own Son. God is angry with His people even when He loves them in Christ with an eternal love, to the extent that they fail to live according to the principle of redemption within them. The same thing holds, *mutatis mutandis*, with respect to the reprobate.⁴⁰

In the same way that God’s wrath towards all humanity is genuine, God’s attitude of love towards all humanity due to common grace is also genuine.⁴¹

Second, God restrains sin in the individual so that he is not as bad as he could be. Van Til makes this divine activity clear when he writes, “He keeps the negative, and therefore destructive, force of sin from breaking out in the fullness of its powers. All men everywhere are kept from working out self-consciously their own adopted principle as covenant-breakers and as the children of wrath.”⁴² In other place, Van Til provides as evidence of “the non-saving grace of God” the “fact that man’s mind is not fully and exclusively bent upon evil. Though basically man is at enmity against God so that he is prone to hate God and his neighbor, this enmity against God does not come to full expression in this life.”⁴³

Third, God enables the unregenerate to perform “civic good.” This is because of the law of God that is written on their hearts (Rom 2:14), their creation in God’s image, and the sense of deity within them. “Sin has not been able to efface all this requisitional material

⁴⁰ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 262.

⁴¹ On this point, see Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 218-219.

⁴² Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 137.

⁴³ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2d ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 168.

from the consciousness of man. The very activity of his consciousness is a daily reminder to him of the will of God. Though he has tried over and over again to choke the voice of God he has not been able to do so. His evil nature would fain subdue the voice of the creation nature, but it cannot wholly do so.”⁴⁴ Additionally, the ability of the reprobate do “that which is ‘morally’ though not spiritually good” can be explained, like the first point, by the fact that humanity finds itself in a “mixed situation.” Just as the elect are able to do “what is ‘evil’ in a sense,” the reprobate are able to do “what is ‘good’ in a sense.”⁴⁵

Special Grace

A couple of things should be noted about the relationship between common grace and special grace in Van Til’s thought. First, common grace is intimately linked to God’s eternal decree of election and reprobation. On the one hand, Van Til repeatedly asserts in his explanations of the doctrine that all of humanity receives common grace due to their corporate solidarity in Adam. This is what it means to be controlled by our notion of the “earlier.” We should not “move the calendar of God ahead,” attempting to discern God’s attitude towards individuals based on their final destiny. Frame summarizes and explains this concept well:

To be ‘controlled by our notion of the later’ is to say that God’s favor to someone is determined exclusively by that person’s foreordained destiny. On this view, if a person is finally saved, then everything God does for him in history is favor, for in every event God is preparing the way for that person’s final salvation. But if the individual is finally lost, then everything God does for him during his life is wrath: in history God does nothing but prepare that person for his final condemnation.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 106.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 191

⁴⁶ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 217.

As mentioned above, Van Til rejects this idea. On the other hand, however, he does see a connection between common grace and the ultimate destiny of individual persons. He regularly speaks of the process of “differentiation.” All of humanity is under “common grace” and “common wrath,” but “*after the common, in each case, comes the conditional.*” History is a process of differentiation. Accordingly, the idea of that which is common between the elect and the reprobate is always a limiting concept. It is a commonness *for the time being*. There lies back of it a divine *as if*.⁴⁷ In other words, common grace is temporary. It gives way to special grace. A particularization of the mass of humanity slowly occurs as men and women consciously respond to the free offer of the Gospel.⁴⁸ Van Til makes his position clear:

Common grace will diminish still more in the further course of history. With every conditional act the remaining significance of the conditional is reduced. God allows men to follow the path of their self-chosen rejection of Him more rapidly than ever toward the final consummation. God increases His attitude of wrath upon the reprobate as time goes on, until at the end of time, at the great consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state. On the other hand God increases his favor upon the elect, until at last, at the consummation of history, their condition has caught up with their state. While in this world, though saved and perfect through Christ, they are yet, because of their old nature, under the displeasure of God.⁴⁹

God’s favorable attitude towards the reprobate is dependent upon the fact that they are not “epistemologically self-conscious as they will be in the future.”⁵⁰ God gives his good gifts to humanity, but will cease to do so as the reprobate reject Christ and differentiate themselves

⁴⁷ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 90.

⁴⁸ See Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 222.

⁴⁹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 100-101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

from the elect.⁵¹ Frame paraphrases Van Til's process of "differentiation" with straightforward language:

God's favor to the nonelect diminishes over time, becoming nonexistent at the final judgment. This happens because, as history progresses, the non elect become more and more hardened in their wickedness. They become more and more like the perfectly wretched souls in hell that they finally will be. Each time they reject God's revelation, they place themselves more decisively upon that path. Toward the end there will be an acceleration of apostasy.⁵²

Common grace is "earlier" grace, the continuation of mankind's original state in Adam, but it is affected by and intimately linked with one's "later" position in Christ. Oliphint unambiguously explains that Van Til's process of differentiation "means that God's eternal decree of predestination and reprobation works itself out *for individuals, in history.*"⁵³

Second, common grace does not have an independent function in the plan of God apart from special grace. Its exclusive purpose is to undergird and support the salvation of individuals. Speaking about the reconciliation of "all things" that takes place "through" Jesus (Col 1:15-20), Van Til writes, "It is in this program of God, it is in connection with this work of Christ by which the world that was cursed of God should be reconciled unto Him for the greater glory of God, that common grace must have a part. All things in history must serve this glorious consummation."⁵⁴ To be sure, common grace is necessary for saving grace. Van Til makes it clear throughout his writings that commonness "is required that the process of particularization may be accomplished"⁵⁵ Van Til does not want to diminish the importance

⁵¹ See *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵² Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 226.

⁵³ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, xxx.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

of common grace, but he does want to bring it under the overarching Covenant of Grace.

This can be clearly seen in the way he expounds upon the idea of God's gifts. They are not primarily intended for pleasure, but to lead mankind to repentance:

When God therefore gives His gifts to men, the gifts of rain and sunshine in season, these gifts are the means by which God's challenge to man speaks forth. God's challenge means that men are asked to love God their Creator and to repent of sin and ask Him for forgiveness. In long-suffering patience God calls men to Himself through these gifts. If they are not so conceived, then these gifts are no conceived according to their function in the plan of God. To say that the facts of rain and sunshine in themselves do not tell us anything of God's grace is to say in effect that the world and what is therein does not speak forth the revelation of God.⁵⁶

Additionally, whatever pleasure the reprobate do receive from these gifts is indirect. Looking at both Exodus 34 and Psalm 145, Van Til draws this conclusion, "Even when God gives great gifts to non-believers, they are, in a more basic sense, gifts to believers. Gifts of God to unbelievers help to make the life of believers possible, and in a measure, pleasant."⁵⁷ In other words, while rain, sunshine, food, and drink benefit the reprobate, they only do so indirectly. Those good gifts of God that he dispenses out of his common grace serve the purpose of special grace.

Richard Mouw

The final view to be considered is that of Richard J. Mouw (b. 1940), the longtime professor and President of Fuller Theological Seminary. Although widely known as a champion of American evangelicalism, the Dutch Calvinist tradition played a pivotal role in Mouw's theological education and early career. He attended Western Theological Seminary,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 192.

the flagship school of the Reformed Church of America (RCA), edited the *Reformed Journal*, and served as Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College for seventeen years. Moreover, Mouw notes in several places that he does his theology “in the line of Kuyper” after discovering him when, he says, “I was struggling with fundamental tensions between my evangelical pietism and what I had come to see as the nonnegotiable biblical mandate to work for justice and peace in the larger human community.”⁵⁸

Motivation

Mouw explicitly states that his interest in the doctrine of common grace has to do primarily with its relevance for understanding culture and interacting with non-Christians in our modern world.⁵⁹ Near the end of *He Shines in All That's Fair*, Mouw writes:

I am convinced that the way we address [contemporary challenges] ought to be more consciously linked to practical concerns about promoting - as much as possible in our fallen world - conditions for human flourishing. My own worries in this area run rather deep these days. To be sure, this concern about how to promote human flourishing in our contemporary context has to do with issues that range far beyond the territory covered by common grace theology as such. But the notion of ‘commonness’ is at the core of what I worry about.⁶⁰

Mouw desires to develop Kuyper’s thoughts on common grace, expanding and correcting them to deal with “new challenges and contexts.”⁶¹ This Neo-Kuyperian project was his life’s work.

⁵⁸ Richard Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the line of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 18.

⁵⁹ Richard Mouw, *He Shines in all that's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶¹ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, viii.

Concept

Much like Van Til, whose booklet *Common Grace* he read in college,⁶² Mouw also affirms all three points of the 1924 Synod at Kalamazoo. First, God has a favorable attitude towards mankind in general. Mouw does not spend much time discussing this point, at least not in its basic formulation. However, he does develop it significantly in some interesting directions. It is well attested in Scripture that God delights in his non-human creation (Gen 1-2; Psalm 104:31). Mouw argues from this that he also takes delight in his human creation, both elect and reprobate. In other words, not only does God have a positive disposition towards the reprobate, shown by his gifts of rain and sunshine, but God also takes personal pleasure in their external pursuits and accomplishments. Mouw makes his thoughts on this clear when he writes:

Let me be concrete: I think God takes delight in Benjamin Franklin's wit and in Tiger Woods's putts and in some well-crafted narrative paragraphs in a Salman Rushdie novel, even if these accomplishments are in fact achieved by non-Christian people. And I am convinced that God's delight in these phenomena does not come because they bring the elect to glory and the non-elect to eternal separation from the divine presence. I think God enjoys these things for their *own* sakes.⁶³

Further, Mouw also posits that God also empathizes with both the elect and reprobate as they experience feelings of joy and sadness. He recounts a story of Muslim woman who was raped by a group of soldiers and then forced to watch her baby executed, and asks this question: "Does the heart of God break when something like this happens? Is the eternal destiny of the people involved the only thing that influences God's assessment when he views such an

⁶² Mouw, *He Shines in all that's Fair*, 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 36.

incident?”⁶⁴ If God has a favorable attitude towards mankind, gives good gifts to mankind, and experiences delight in mankind, then it seems reasonable to assume that he also empathizes with mankind when they endure injustice and suffering.

Second, God restrains sin in the world. Much like the previous point, Mouw does not consider this point directly in his book. However, it safe to assume that he would affirm the restraining aspect of common grace since he is a follower of Kuyper, who, as we saw above, places great emphasis on this. Furthermore, Mouw does mention the idea of a divine restraint of sin in several places. When he discusses humanity’s role as agents of common grace, he writes, “We should not just stand back and watch for sign that God is restraining sin in the world. . . . Actively promoting the welfare, the shalom, of the larger human community will require us also to speak in the public square about policies and practices that can restrain sin.”⁶⁵ These indirect references combined with the fact that he does not explicitly contradict or argue against this second point gives us confidence in Mouw’s acceptance of the arresting nature of common grace.

Third, God enables the reprobate to perform civic good. Regarding this aspect, Mouw leaves no room for ambiguity: “I think that God also gives positive *moral* appraisals to non-elect persons.” To back up his beliefs here, he points out that both the Canons of Dordt and The Westminster Confession of Faith leave open the possibility that the unregenerate can perform morally good deeds despite the fact they are “incapable of any *saving* good.”⁶⁶ Moreover, these virtuous acts by the reprobate demonstrating the interior operation of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 81, 84.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 38-39.

common grace, to use Kuyper's language, are the direct result of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷ On this point, he approvingly quotes the following passage from John Bolt:

If we can theologially conceive of the Holy Spirit giving the gift of life to an unbeliever and even further giving an unbeliever natural gifts (intelligence, musical ability, healthy and athletic body), why could we not conceive of a work of God the Holy Spirit that providentially influences an unbeliever's heart and will so that he or she does constructive and externally virtuous acts rather than destructive ones?⁶⁸

In other words, God enables the unregenerate to perform civic good in the same way that he empowers the elect to do so, by way of the third person of the Trinity.

Special Grace

Before comparing the views of these three theologians, at least one thing should be noted about the relationship between common grace and special grace in Mouw's thought. He believes, and strongly asserts throughout his book, that common grace has an independent function in the plan of God apart from special grace. He writes, "The underlying view that I am endorsing here posits multiple divine purposes in the world. To state in plainly: I am insisting that as God unfolds his plan for his creation, he is interested in more than one thing. Alongside of God's clear concern about the eternal destiny of individuals are his designs for the larger creation."⁶⁹ This assertion is not original to Mouw. In many respects, he is simply reiterating what both Kuyper and Bavinck believed. However, Mouw does make a unique contribution here by linking the number divine purposes in the world with old Calvinist

⁶⁷ Ibid., 44; see also Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri de Vries (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), 22-24.

⁶⁸ John Bolt, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: The Temptations of Calvinist Politics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (2000): 237, quoted in Mouw, *Shines*, 44-45.

⁶⁹ Mouw, *He Shines in all that's Fair*, 50.

debate between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism.⁷⁰ Both positions agree that God's "overriding divine motive," his primary purpose in the world, is his own glory. However, as Mouw explains, they disagree by what means this is accomplished:

The supralapsarian position quickly identifies the project by which God chooses to have this desire satisfied: by bringing elect and reprobate human beings to their respective destinies. . . . The infralapsarian view insists on more complexity in its treatment of the content of God's self-glorifying designs. God desire for self-glorification, in the infralapsarian narrative establishes a broader plot at the outset.⁷¹

In other words, if God logically decreed creation before he decreed election and reprobation, it follows that the world must have a purpose distinct from the plan of redemption. The development of the cosmos by means of common grace is not lesser than or merely a servant of special grace.

A Comparison of Their Views

Having given a brief explanation of the doctrine of common grace as found in the writings of Kuyper, Van Til, and Mouw respectively, a number of similarities and differences between their views can now be pointed out. All three men seem to affirm the three points accepted by the 1924 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. They all teach that both the elect and reprobate receive common grace in this life and that common grace is temporary.

⁷⁰ See David J. Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's He Shines in all that's Fair* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), xi.

⁷¹ Mouw, *He Shines in all that's Fair*, 60.

Furthermore, despite occasionally being criticized for having a less than robust view of sin, all three of these orthodox Reformed theologians hold to the doctrine of total depravity.⁷²

With all of these agreements, however, there are a number of differences. First, they differ on which aspect of common grace receives the most attention in their writings.

Kuyper's focus is primarily on the Synod's second point, namely God's arresting of sin so that culture may continue to progress. While affirming the negative function of common grace, Van Til neglects this positive function of common grace that results in the building of culture.⁷³ His attention is primarily given to God's disposition towards humanity in Adam. Interestingly, Kuyper does not explicitly address this first point of the Synod at all. Mouw seems to focus on the Synod's third point, specifically the fact that the reprobate can perform deeds that are physically and morally commendable.

Second, they disagree on the relationship between common grace and special grace. Kuyper's division of the two is somewhat dualistic. Van Til rejects this separation, believing that common grace and special grace serve one common purpose of God: "We must unite the idea of creation in Christ with that of His redemption of all things."⁷⁴ Mouw finds himself in between Kuyper and Van Til by maintaining a twofold purpose of God in the world, while at

⁷² For example, Henry Van Til criticizes Kuyper for reducing sin to a minimum and falling into cultural optimism (*The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 119), and David Engelsma continuously accuses anyone who holds to the doctrine of common grace, including Mouw, for believing in "partial depravity" (*Common Grace Revisited*, 2, 15). Interestingly, Cornelius Van Til defends Kuyper on this point in at least two separate places (*Common Grace and the Gospel*, 21-22, 189); See also VanderKam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," 58.

⁷³ See Jan van Vliet, "From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999): 91.

⁷⁴ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 260.

the same time bringing common grace and special grace closer together. He accomplishes this primarily by affirming an infralapsarian view of the divine decrees.

Third, they differ on how much common ground there is between the elect and reprobate, which, as mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, this is the question that common grace is most interested in answering. Kuyper believes that the elect and reprobate have common ground on many levels. They exist in the same metaphysical situation, experiencing their surroundings by the same means of touch, sight, and sound.⁷⁵ Therefore, he believes, the believer and the unbeliever have common ground in their basic interpretations of the world, especially those things that have not been affected by sin. This means, for example, that the status of one's eternal destiny does not affect their ability to measure, weigh, or count. Kuyper writes, "Whether something weighs two or three milligrams, may be absolutely determined by any one able to weigh."⁷⁶ Both the reprobate and the elect are able to interpret the natural world. Not only, then, do they have metaphysical common ground, but also some epistemological common ground. "Thus in Kuyper's taxonomy, there are three territories in which both believing and unbelieving interpreters of observable fact can have formal interaction: all natural (lower) sciences, the lower spiritual sciences, and logic."⁷⁷

Because of his presuppositional epistemology, Van Til differs significantly from Kuyper on the idea of common ground between the elect and the reprobate. At the very least,

⁷⁵ Begbie, "Creation, Christ and Culture in Dutch Neo-Calvinism," 118.

⁷⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedia der heilige godgeleerdheid* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1894), 2:105, quoted in Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 53.

⁷⁷ Vliet, "From Condition to State," 77.

it must be said that he nuances it much more carefully than Kuyper. He accepts commonness between the elect and the reprobate “up to a point” - “when and to the extent that the natural man is engaged in interpreting life in terms of his *adopted principles then*, and *only* then, he has nothing in common with the believer.”⁷⁸ Van Til would agree with Kuyper that the believer and unbeliever live in the same physical situation, but he would disagree with the notion that they truly see anything the same way. This is because the reprobate person attempts to interpret everything apart from the existence of God, rather than in light of it. The believer and the unbeliever see the world through a different set of spectacles: “The natural man has cemented colored glasses to his face. And all things are yellow to the jaundiced eye.”⁷⁹ In other words, although the metaphysical world on the other side of the lenses is the same for both the believer and unbeliever, they will interpret that world differently. They must. “Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common.”⁸⁰ This means, therefore, that there is not common ground between the elect and reprobate even in the lower sciences or logic. Unfortunately, Mouw does not specifically address the topics of metaphysical common ground or epistemological common ground, so I will not attempt to draw any conclusions from his work on this point.

Fourth, these three theologians disagree on the relationship between common grace and the antithesis - “the real and uncompromising, although uneven, contest being waged between God and Satan, between Christ and antichrist, between the seed of the woman and

⁷⁸ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 187.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

the seed of the serpent, between the church and the world.”⁸¹ Kuyper seems to have completely ignored the antithesis, at least in his writings on common grace, and is often criticized for doing so. For example, Bratt comments that he is puzzled by the fact “that one so conscious of human depravity could praise almost without qualification the ‘free’ and ‘natural’ development of social institutions and instinctively frown upon restraints.”⁸² On the other hand, Van Til emphasized the antithesis to the point that it became the driving factor in his articulation of common grace. “Whether he meant to or not, by denying epistemological common ground, Van Til created an atmosphere where the antithesis became supreme.”⁸³

Mouw finds himself in the middle of Kuyper and Van Til. He acknowledges, but downplays the antithesis. Mouw explicitly mentions it and the fact that it stands in tension with the doctrine of common grace, but then gives it a backseat.⁸⁴ This is due, at least in part, to the fact that his understanding of the antithesis is cosmic and corporate in scope rather than narrow and individualistic.⁸⁵ He says that “the antithesis is not an opposition that holds between the church and the world as such, but between the cause of God and the cause of Satan.”⁸⁶ While Mouw takes this doctrine seriously, he consciously chooses to emphasize common grace instead. He writes, “We Kuyperians do pay considerable attention to

⁸¹ Henry Stob, “Observations on the Concept of Antithesis,” in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity*, eds. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 242, quoted in Mouw, *He Shines in all that’s Fair*, 15.

⁸² Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 28.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁸⁴ Mouw, *He Shines in all that’s Fair*, 14.

⁸⁵ This is against the view of Engelsma, who defines the antithesis as “the spiritual separation and opposition between the holy church and the unholy world or wicked men, between the believer and the ‘infidel’” (*Common Grace Revisited*, 71).

⁸⁶ Mouw, *He Shines in all that’s Fair*, 25.

fallenness-at least we ought to-but our basic Kuyperian impulse is to look for signs that God has not given up, even in the midst of a fallen world, on restoring the purposes that were at work in God's initial creating activity."⁸⁷

Fifth, these three men differ on the responsibility of mankind in advancing common grace in the world. For Kuyper, the activity of man acts as an instrument of common grace. By and large, God works independently from the activity of man in the negative operation of common grace. This does not mean, however, that humanity has no role in helping to restrain the effects of sin. For example, in speaking about politics and the sphere of the state, Kuyper specifically mentions that "the magistrate is an instrument of 'common grace' to thwart all license and outrage and to shield the good against the evil."⁸⁸ In the positive operation of common grace, Kuyper teaches that God works dependently to accomplish his purposes. Common grace does not just passively allow for the development of civilization. Mankind is a co-worker with God in bringing forth culture in the world.

This is very different from Van Til, who views the activity of man primarily as assisting in the process of differentiation. He writes, "We are therefore to witness to men that in themselves they are enemies of God. We are to witness to them that this enmity appears even in such dimensions as that of counting and weighing. . . . And we are to oppose men more definitely to the extent that they become epistemologically more self-conscious."⁸⁹ Furthermore, Van Til believes that it is not possible for Christians to join with non-Christians in the scientific enterprise, without witnessing to them of God:

⁸⁷ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 20.

⁸⁸ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 83-84.

⁸⁹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 101.

The Christian working in the laboratory is confronted with the necessity of leaving the laboratory, giving it over entirely to the unbeliever or witnessing to the fact that only if Christianity is true is science possible and meaningful. . . .

Surely the witness to the God of the Scriptures must be presented everywhere. It must be, to be sure, presented with wisdom and with tact. But it must be presented. It is not presented, however, if we grant that God the Holy Spirit in a general testimony to all men approves of interpretations of this world or of aspects of this world which ignore Him and set Him at naught.⁹⁰

According to Van Til's understanding of common grace, the elect are not to join with God in restraining the effects of sin or engage in the advancement of civilization. The role of God's people is primarily to participate in the work of special grace through witness-bearing, evangelism, and apologetics.

Mouw follows Kuyper on this point, believing that man does have an important role to play in advancing common grace. The elect should work for the well-being of society, as Jeremiah commanded the Israelites in Babylon to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf" (Jer 29:7). In addition to this, Mouw also argues that believers should seek to imitate God's favorable disposition towards the non-elect:

I believe that we are commanded to care for all those in poverty. Furthermore, I am convinced that in cultivating that kind of caring disposition we are imitating God's concern for all impoverished people. Which is to say that a proper theology of poverty, and more broadly, of justice, is inextricably linked to common grace - the teaching that God has a positive, albeit non-salvific, regard for those who are not elect, a regard that he asks us to cultivate in our own souls.⁹¹

Finally, he advocates for modest and humble attempts to bring about cultural transformation, rather than being either triumphalist or apathetic.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid., 165.

⁹¹ Mouw, *He Shines in all that's Fair*, 82.

⁹² Ibid., 50.

CHAPTER 4

ASSESSING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

Having compared the views of Kuyper, Van Til, and Mouw on a number of key points, it comes time to assess their positions. What follows is not exhaustive. In fact, it will be woefully brief. The purpose of this section is twofold. First, can any version of the doctrine of common grace, including the three outlined above, be defended from Scripture? In other words, can it be shown that this teaching “is expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” or is it merely a tradition of man?¹ Second, was the development of the common grace in the Dutch Calvinist community in America influenced by their historical experiences?

Exegetically

Like every Christian doctrine, we must compare the teachings of men with the words of Scripture. In his article “Common Grace,” John Murray makes this definitive statement regarding the exegetical case for the doctrine:

The evidence drawn from Scripture, then, compels the conclusion that the world as a whole, though subject to the curse incident to sin, receives the showers of manifold blessing, that men who still lie under the divine condemnation of sin, including even those who will finally suffer the full weight of that condemnation in

¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6.

perdition, are the recipients in this life of multiple favours that proceed from God's lovingkindness.²

However, not everyone is convinced that Scripture clearly teaches common grace. There are a host of passages that could be discussed below, such as those (1) that highlight God's restraint upon sin (Gen 20:6; Job 1:12, 2:6; Rom 13:1-4) and patience towards the reprobate (Gen 6:3; Is 48:9; Luke 13:6-9; Acts 17:30; Rom 2:4, 9:22; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet 3:9) or (2) that indicate the unregenerate's ability to do moral good (2 Kings 10:30, 12:2; Matt 5:46, Luke 6:33, Rom 2:14-15). Instead, I would like to focus another category that teaches God's divine favor and goodness towards the non-elect, demonstrated through his natural blessings to them (Gen 17:20, 39:5; Acts 14:16-17; James 1:17).

Luke 6:35

The first passage to be considered is probably the most common and most critical proof text used to support common grace. David Engelsma, who rejects the concept of common grace altogether, even admits that this passage "is important in the controversy over common grace."³ Jesus' teaching to love your enemies takes place in the early part of his Galilean ministry (4:16-9:50) during his so called "Sermon on the Plain" (6:12-49). In his commentary on Luke, Robert Stein points out that the list of imperatives found in this passage are the first commands of Jesus in the Third Gospel and are directed primarily at his disciples.⁴ Jesus is explaining the practices that should define the community of his

² John Murray, "Common Grace," *Westminster Theological Journal* 5 (1942): 21.

³ David J. Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's He Shines in all that's Fair* (Jenison, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 11.

⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 206.

followers. In other words, these commands are not a list of instructions about how to become a disciple, but rather how to act as one after the fact. Christian living is one of the main theological emphases of Luke's writings.⁵ Joel Green, in his commentary, writes, "The purpose of Luke-Acts, then, would be primarily ecclesiological - concerned with the practices that define and the criteria for legitimizing the community of God's people, and centered on the invitation to participate in God's project."⁶

Jesus gives four commands to "love," "do good," "bless," and "pray" (v.27-28). These are followed by four examples to explain what loving one's enemies looks like in real life when insulted, robbed, or asked for charity (v.29-30).⁷ Jesus, then, summarizes the primarily volitional, rather than emotional, nature of his teaching with the Golden Rule: "as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them" (v.31). The three examples that are given next follow a standardized pattern: "If you _____ those who also _____ you, then what credit is that to you? Even those who don't love God act that way" (v.32-34). Jesus makes the Golden Rule concrete in these verses, driving home the point that the behavior of his followers should not be dependent upon how it is received and/or reciprocated by the other person. Green explains that Jesus is refuting the common thought pattern of day:

He . . . rejects the valance reciprocity and patronal ethic characteristic of life in the peasant village and in its external relations with the wider Roman world (vv 32-34). This was everyday life marked in part by the imbalance of social and economic relations typified in claims of honor and status and in the exertion of power over others. Jesus rejects the life of obligation and debt.⁸

⁵ See *Ibid.*, 51-54.

⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 22.

⁷ Stein, *Luke*, 207-208.

⁸ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 270.

Loving one's enemies cannot be based on whether or not they will ever return the favor!

In the next verse, Jesus grounds these commands in the character of God himself, who "is kind to the ungrateful and the evil" (v.35). The teaching that "reciprocity is not enough" is critical to recognize in order to understand this text! Engelsma argues that the kindness spoken about here is saving grace given to the unthankful and evil elect people, not the reprobate.⁹ While such a conclusion may be possible, it destroys the meaning of the passage. If there is an expectation of reciprocity on God's part, the analogy falls apart. If he "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt 5:45) *with the sole purpose* that those people who receive his gifts will turn towards him in love, then how can Jesus command his disciples to "be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (v.36)? That would be affirming their expectations for reciprocity, rather than challenging them! The comparison would radically contradict everything leading up to this verse. Jesus' point is this: His followers are to do good to all men without expecting to receive anything in return, just as God the Father gives good gifts to all men without expecting to receive anything, including worship, in return.

Psalm 145:9

The second passage to be considered, like the first, is also frequently referred to as support for God's favorable disposition towards the reprobate. The Psalmist praises the Lord's faithfulness to the Covenant (v.4-7) and everlasting rule over His Kingdom (v.10-13). He speaks at length about God's redemptive acts towards his people, who are distinguished from the rest of mankind as those who "call on him" (v.18) and "fear Him" (v.19).

⁹ See Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited*, 18-24.

Furthermore, the elect will be kept and the wicked destroyed (v.20). However, this emphasis on God's plan of redemption does not stop the Psalmist from also praising God for his care of all creatures, as Willem VanGemeren notes in his commentary on the Psalter: "His royal love extends to the whole domain of his rule, including his creation. . . . His royal love also evidences itself in acts of provision. He royally satisfies the needs of every living creature (104:27-28) as the master of a house opens his hand to all who are dependent on him. . . . The creatures are satiated with his provisions."¹⁰ It seems odd, even shocking, that such a general statement of God's favor (v.9) would immediately follow an explicit reference to the Covenant name of God revealed at Sinai (v.8; See also Ex 34:6).

A similar juxtaposition occurs in the book of Jonah. The prophet laments the repentance of Nineveh saying, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? This is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (4:2). In response to Jonah's anger and bitterness, God asks, "Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (v.11). God is good and has compassion towards all his creatures, including the reprobate who are made in his image.

From this brief look at these two key passages, it seems best to conclude that Scripture teaches that God has a favorable disposition towards the non-elect. To be clear, we cannot deduce from these texts alone which version of common grace is the most theologically sound or exegetically consistent, especially as it relates to the other points of

¹⁰ Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 863.

the 1924 Synod, but we can affirm that common grace has a legitimate biblical foundation. The doctrine is not wholly alien to the Word of God.

Historically

Like all of us, Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and Richard Mouw did not theologize or write about the doctrine of common grace in a vacuum. These three men each lived in the particular place at the particular time in history that God had ordained for them. Therefore, we must take this reality into consideration. In this section, I want to briefly explore the historical events that occurred within the Dutch Calvinist tradition in America during the twentieth century. I believe that this background will shed light on the differences of opinion on common grace exhibited in the writings of Kuyper, Van Til, and Mouw, as well as demonstrate that their doctrine was influenced by their present covenant communities and contextualized to address the modern issues of their generation.

Neo-Calvinism, the nationwide and comprehensive Calvinist movement in the Netherlands led by Abraham Kuyper, made its way to America primarily through Dutch immigration during the years of 1870-1920. The issue of acculturation soon became the preeminent issue, as Barend Klass Kuiper notes, “We are quickly changing from Hollanders to Americans. This process of Americanization by itself is not in the least a problem. It is a process that cannot and may not be held back. We shall become Americans and we must become Americans. It is an irresistible, moral duty.”¹¹ While assimilation into the American culture seemed inevitable, the vast majority of Dutch Calvinists were cautious about the

¹¹ B. K. Kuiper, *Ons Opmaken en Bouwen* (Grand Rapids, 1918), 128, quoted in James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 41.

process, believing that “American culture threatened the very core of the community’s existence.”¹² They were willing in many ways to sacrifice their nationality, but did not want to lose their Reformed religion, convictions, and practices.

As the group wrestled with the tensions of assimilating into their new culture while also maintaining their heritage, it subdivided into three distinct camps.¹³ The Confessionalists were grounded in the pietist tradition and traced their roots to the Seceder movement. They distrusted the American version of Christianity that they saw, believing it to be too individualistic and anthropocentric, rather than covenantal and theocentric.¹⁴ They also rejected Kuyper’s Neo-Calvinism. One of their most prominent leaders, Foppe Ten Hoor, spent fifteen years in the Netherlands (1880-1895) combating the movement before immigrating to Grand Rapids.¹⁵

The other two camps were both Kuyperian in their theology, sharing a number of the “Neo-Calvinist hallmarks,” such as supralapsarianism and an emphasis on Christian cultural activism.¹⁶ However, they divided over the doctrines of the antithesis and common grace. Kuyper did not see them as mutually exclusive and was able to hold both in tension. Bratt writes, “The paradox served Kuyper’s genius well but left Neo-Calvinism with ominous

¹² Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 57

¹³ I am intentionally ignoring the Reformed Church in America (RCA), which Bratt lists as a fourth camp. Although they were the largest group of Dutch Calvinists, they root their heritage back further than this period, to colonial America, and trace their theology directly to the Reformation. Because of this, the RCA was not heavily influenced by Kuyper or Neo-Calvinism and did not participate in the common grace debates of the early 20th century.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

ideological strains.”¹⁷ Not everyone in the community had an easy time accepting these two seemingly contradictory doctrines.

The Antitheticals made the antithesis absolute. They wanted separate Calvinistic organizations to protect the purity of the elect and “to strength antithetical consciousness.” They emphasized that the elect and the reprobate “lived out of different principles” and “could not work toward the same ends, by the same means, or for the same reasons.”¹⁸ They also distrusted all things American, choosing to adhere to Dutch examples instead, and were pessimistic about cultural progress.¹⁹ Bratt gives this enlightening summary about Klass Schoolland, one of the Antitheticals key leaders: “Where Kuyper developed principles out of concrete situations and toward practical effect, Schoolland spun his in abstraction and remained exclusively theoretical. Kuyper mixes several strains; Schoolland saw little besides antithesis.”²⁰

The final group was the Positivists, who emphasized the doctrine of common grace. They also wanted separate Christian schools and organizations “in which the faithful could be nurtured from the cradle to the grave.” However, their purpose was not to shelter the elect from the culture, but to prepare the Calvinist to transform it. They also urged the Dutch community to adopt the English language, rather than their native tongue.²¹ Their leaders, Johannes Groen and B.K. Kuiper, and gave bold calls for Americanization, while Henry

¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71-72.

¹⁹ Ibid., 50-51.

²⁰ Ibid., 50.

²¹ Ibid., 52-53.

Beets built bridges with other denominations and endorsed evangelist Billy Sunday.²² Few during this period were able successfully to straddle the Dutch Calvinist party lines. One man who was able to transcend these categories was Louis Berkhof (1873-1957), the distinguished Calvin Seminary professor who would later teach Cornelius Van Til systematic theology.²³

The Positive Calvinists lead the way before and during World War 1. They became popular, in part, to their encouraging of Patriotism, which Bratt notes, “became informally adopted into the denominational order when the CRC Synod of 1918 met in a hall bedecked with American flags, sent President Wilson a telegram declaring its support ‘in this righteous cause,’ and even joined the notoriously ‘liberal’ Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America in order to facilitate its own ministrations in army camps.”²⁴ The result of all this was not unity, however, but further conflict. The community became polarized between the the celebrators of Americanism and the defenders of Dutch heritage.²⁵ After the war, the Positive Calvinists continued to gain ground on the other camps. They bought out the Antithetical’s journal and began to heavily critique and overtly ridicule both the Confessionalists and the Antitheticals. “The spring of 1919, with the founding of *Religion and Culture* and the *Journal*’s three-part attack on its rivals,” writes Bratt, “marked the high tide of the positive Calvinists.”²⁶

²² Ibid., 78.

²³ Ibid., 54; See also Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2d ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015), 243 (n.13).

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 84.

²⁶ Ibid., 101.

The decisive battle in the Dutch Reformed community began with the 1922 CRC Synod's decision to depose of Ralph Janssen, Professor of Old Testament at Calvin Seminary, for "heresy and insubordination." His supporters, mostly Positive Calvinists, began to attack the Anti-Janssen group in response. They called them "Anabaptists" for denying the doctrine of common grace, turning what seemed to be a secondary issue in the Janssen case into the main issue. Herman Hoeksema, who explicitly rejected the notion of common grace and was a central figure in fighting against Janssen, now became the focus of a new heresy trail.²⁷

In June 1924, the Synod ruled against Hoeksema, who ultimately left the denomination as a result. Its study committee decided that the doctrine of common grace was taught both in Scripture and in the Confessions.²⁸ However, it was not as decisive of a victory for the Positive Calvinists as it might appear. The Synod's ruling and explanation of the doctrine leaned towards the Confessionalist position, as Bratt notes: "Common grace was tangential, not fundamental to Reformed thought; it had more potential for danger than for progress; it did have, almost unfortunately, scriptural warrant, but its denial hardly menaced the church's welfare as had Janssen's teaching."²⁹

After the Synod, some Dutch Reformed did propose a more traditional Kuyperian view of common grace, urging that its central purpose was cultural. However, most took the "narrow, negative track" that emphasized the doctrine of total depravity and conceived of common grace as having primary evangelistic value because it made the preaching of the

²⁷ Ibid., 105-113.

²⁸ Ibid., 113-114.

²⁹ Ibid., 114.

gospel possible.³⁰ The pendulum had dramatically swung away from the progressives to the pietists. Bratt succinctly summarizes the ripple effect from the 1924 Synod's decision this way: "Thus the positive Calvinists came to grief at the very time they should have been victorious."³¹

Thanks to the Great Depression and the Second World War, the next two decades in America were dominated by fear and a sense of pessimism. During this period, the Dutch Calvinist community lost its optimism and most of its motivation to influence culture.³² This was due to the mood of the times, as well as the efforts of Henry J. Kuiper, who studied under Ten Hoor at Calvin Seminary and edited the *Banner* during this period. He worked tirelessly to promote the Pietist-Confessionalist cause, and gave little more than lip service to Abraham Kuyper or the Positive Calvinist program.³³ Additionally, the Dutch Reformed community was busy fighting Neo-Orthodoxy (Neibuhr, Barth, etc.) on the left and Fundamentalism (dispensational premillennialism) on the right.³⁴ This drove them to pursue theological precision above all else, as Bratt makes clear:

The CRC's emphasis upon doctrine in these years was, in fact, unprecedented. The RCA's orthodoxy had never been so obsessive; the Netherlandic ancestors, whether Seceder or Neo-Calvinist, had never made doctrine the whole of religion as their descendants were now close to doing. Likewise, the prewar Confessionalists had given experiential piety equal place with orthodoxy and had campaigned for one among several refinements of the Reformed tradition, not-as the present generation-for the whole of Christianity against an antithetical faith. This made Berkhof's

³⁰ Ibid., 114-115.

³¹ Ibid., 118.

³² Ibid., 123-124.

³³ Ibid., 125-126.

³⁴ Ibid., 130-134

Reformed Dogmatics more than a mere product of the age; it made it the monument of the age.³⁵

It was immediately following this period and in this theological environment that the Dutch Reformed community experienced “an eerie return to the battles of the 1920s,” namely the doctrine of common grace.³⁶

A hostile situation at Calvin Seminary lead the CRC Synod to remove most of the faculty in 1952. During this time of turmoil, Cornelius Van Til was invited to the seminary, especially to teach against Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy, which was gaining a small foothold there. Ultimately, Bratt writes, “he declined their invitation to stay on permanently, but he did remain long enough to shatter the delicate settlement of 1924.”³⁷ From the time that Neo-Calvinism reached the shores of America, there had not been much development in the doctrine of common grace. In the early 20th century, each of the three camps stood their ground, reiterating their respective positions rather than compromising or moving forward.³⁸ The pendulum of opinion simply swung back and forth. Therefore, Van Til’s attempt to propose a balanced “third way” to view the doctrine of common grace was much needed. However, his work proved not to be much of an advancement after all.

As a student of Berkhof and one engaged in constant combat with Neo-Orthodoxy, Van Til’s doctrine puts an undue amount of emphasis on theological precision. His ultimate denial of epistemological common ground, created an atmosphere where the antithesis

³⁵ Ibid., 134-135.

³⁶ Ibid., 187

³⁷ Ibid., 191.

³⁸ Ibid., 54.

became supreme. Van Til's view had no room for the Positive Calvinist mentality, as Jan van Vliet writes:

While commending Kuyper for a broadening of perspective in the development of his common grace doctrine, it would appear that Van Til has himself forgotten this broader perspective in the formulation of his own model. For, with the exception of some very rare intimations of God's general beneficence, Van Til's model focuses exclusively on, in Kuyper's words, the 'constant' operation of common grace, abandoning pretty much altogether the 'progressive' aspect.³⁹

Therefore, his "third way" ultimately ends up looking like the Antithetical position dressed up in new clothing, rather than a fundamentally different position. Much like the "decisive" battle over common grace in the 1920s, the Confessionalists joined forces with the Antithetical Kuyperians.⁴⁰ This can be seen in the writings of Henry Van Til, Cornelius' namesake and protege, who emphasized the importance and pervasiveness of the antithesis.⁴¹

During the next several decades, the Progressive Calvinists began to open up more and more to the broader American Christian community.⁴² This period of evangelicalism is where we encounter Richard Mouw, who values learning from various theological traditions. He regularly utilizes Puritan, Wesleyan, and Pentecostal sources, and is willing to dialogue with Anabaptists.⁴³ Mouw is not combative in tone. He values a diversity of opinion, advocating that there is a benefit in Calvinist diversity on issues, namely on the topic of

³⁹ Jan van Vliet, "From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999): 91.

⁴⁰ Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 195.

⁴¹ Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 181, 237.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 217; See also Richard J. Mouw, "Cultural Discipleship in a Time of God's Patience," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 28 (2010): 80-91.

Christ and culture, especially as it relates to common grace and the antithesis.⁴⁴ Moreover, he explicitly states that his desire in writing *He Shines in All That's Fair* was to give the doctrine of common grace “some broader ecumenical exposure.”⁴⁵ Mouw’s doctrine of common grace shifted the primary focus away from the negative aspect towards the positive aspect. Furthermore, it broadened the conversations from narrowly Neo-Calvinist to widely evangelical and the theological references to incorporate a variety of Christian traditions, rather than simply Kuyper and Bavinck.

After writing about the history of Dutch Calvinism in America for over two hundred pages, Bratt draws several conclusions. One of them is the fact that the Americanization of community was ultimately an acculturation into evangelical America.⁴⁶ Over the course of the twentieth century, the Dutch Reformed community became not only more American, but also less Calvinist. Bratt notes, “the positive Calvinists have always aspired to both critique and acceptance, and their performance after both World Wars shows that in the pinch the latter will win. Whether that also proves to be the legacy of the Vietnam War cannot yet be determined. But certain trends must be less than thrilling from their point of view. ‘Opening up’ to America can take any number of directions, not just toward the ‘right kind’ of evangelicals.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the line of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 156-157.

⁴⁵ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in all that's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 8.

⁴⁶ Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 219.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

What Bratt points out, then, is the fact that the pressure to show themselves American during times of war, specially the first and second world war, accelerated the Dutch Calvinist community's process of acculturation. Furthermore, he hypothesizes that this trend would continue during the later part of the twentieth century. In his article, William Dennison reflects on the state of Dutch Calvinism in modern America and postulates that it has developed in two directions. Interestingly, both of them reflect the Positive Calvinist viewpoint. The Creation Order Neo-Calvinists and the Shalom Neo-Calvinists urge active Christian involvement in the culture, but with slightly different goals. The first seeks to re-establish "creation norms" in society, while the second seeks to establish peace and justice in society. Furthermore, the Shalom Neo-Calvinism that Dennison highlights shows that the general movement within the Dutch Reformed thought is to open up to broader theological circles. He notes that Nicholas Wolterstorff's thoughts are "a synthesis of certain positive traits from Reformed Kuyperianism and Christian Marxism."⁴⁸ It appears that Bratt's hypothesis can be affirmed. The Positive Calvinists have continued to dominate the landscape, and the process of Americanization within the community has continued to progress into the next century.

Having now determined that Dutch Reformed community was heavily influenced by their experiences of acculturation, what can we conclude regarding the doctrine of common grace? In other words, how does this historical assessment help us understand the differences between the views of Kuyper, Van Til, and Mouw? I believe there are two noticeable trends that should be pointed out. First, those who accept the doctrine place their emphasis on

⁴⁸ William D. Dennison, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999), 284.

common grace rather than on the antithesis. The pendulum that swung back and forth throughout the twentieth century seems to have settled, for the time being, on the positive aspect. Second, the primary development in the doctrine of common grace in the Dutch Calvinist tradition is in an expanding of the Synod's first point, namely that God has a favorable disposition towards the non-elect. At first glance this may not seem to demonstrate the influence of Americanization. However, if common grace was connected to the Dutch Calvinist immigrants' questions about their new American neighbors, as Mouw posits, than it has everything to do with it.⁴⁹

As mentioned in the section above on exploration, Kuyper says almost nothing about God's favorable attitude towards the reprobate. Therefore, it is not surprising to see very little on this point early in the twentieth century, when the new immigrated Dutch community was first putting down roots in America. However, after experiencing the First World War the concept of divine disposition is explicitly accepted by the 1924 CRC Synod at Kalamazoo. After the Second World War, Cornelius Van Til moves the ball even further down the field. He goes beyond simple proof texting and provides a sound theological foundation for it. God's favor upon the non-elect is due to their status "in Adam." Finally, in modern times, when the Dutch community has long become Americanized, Mouw adds divine delight and divine empathy to his conception of common grace. The more that the Dutch community discovered that their American neighbors were similar to them, the more they viewed them in a favorable light. Right or wrong, this is not wholly unlike the influence that gay rights movement currently is having on theology. Fifty years ago, it was easy for the Christian

⁴⁹ Mouw, *He Shines in all that's Fair*, 11.

community to unambiguously denounce homosexuality, because so few people had a friend, neighbor, family member, or co-worker who was openly gay. However, now that a majority of Christians can attach a person, face, or story to that issue, the tide has shifted dramatically. Denominations have “opened up” to homosexuality.

Having explored, compared, and assessed the individual views of Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and Richard Mouw, it seems safe to conclude that these three representative theologians in the Dutch Calvinist tradition show that the development of the doctrine of common grace was significantly influenced by the experiences and acculturation of the Dutch Reformed community in America.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the introductory chapter, I stated that it was important for us to explore and come to some conclusions on individual doctrines that ungird a Calvinistic world-and-life view, because these foundational beliefs ultimately help us develop an answer to the enduring problem of Christ and culture. For the past sixty pages, we have examined the doctrine of common grace in the Dutch Calvinist tradition and seen that it has developed over the course of the twentieth century, influenced by the process of Americanization. This conclusion seems to complicate the issue and create confusion rather than clarify. I disagree. There is an important lesson to be learned from the way in which these three theologians approach the issue of common grace that will assist us as we work to develop our own views of the doctrine, as well as Christianity's relationship to culture: We must be willing to live in the tension.

John Calvin was not afraid to affirm seemingly opposite teachings if he saw them both in Scripture.¹ Regarding Calvin's views on the doctrine of common grace, Kuiper writes, "To be sure, we do come across a number of contradictions which are more apparent than real. And in so far as we meet with real contradictions, these are contradictions which bear the character of paradoxes which Calvin himself acknowledges, paradoxes which, in our

¹ For example of this, see Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the line of Abraham Kuiper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 3-6.

author's view, are involved in the teaching of the Scriptures which he sought to expound."² God loves only the elect *and* God loves men who are not. Virtues found with unregenerate men are fruits of the operations of the Holy Spirit *and* divine gifts and virtues of the heathen are sin. The non-elect are destitute of every blessing *and* the goodness of God extends to the reprobate.

Kuyper, following Calvin's lead, accepts these tensions as well. He affirms both the doctrine of common grace and the antithesis, choosing to emphasize them at different times as he saw fit. Discussing his parliamentary career, Mouw notes that "when Kuyper wanted to rally the Calvinist troops to support an unpopular partisan effort he would preach antithesis, but when the opportunity arose to forge a strategic alliance with another party on a given issue he would remind his followers that God often works mysteriously in the hearts of the unregenerate to restrain their sinful tendencies."³ Bavinck argues that living in the tension is one of the hallmarks of a Reformed world-and-life view. By acknowledging "both the seriousness of sin and the legitimacy of the natural," Calvinism has been able to avoid polarized, one-sided views such as Pelagianism and pietism, Anabaptism and Socinianism, where "the one group was conformed to the world, while the other practiced world-flight."⁴

Van Til, attempting to create a "third way" of viewing common grace, also embraced tension. He desired to be faithful to Scripture and hold apparent contradictions together rather than making logical deductions from one or the other and ending up with an unbiblical

² H. Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Smither, 1928), 215.

³ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 17; See also James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: The History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 19-20.

⁴ Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. R. C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 52-53.

conclusion-what he refers to as “abstract thinking.” Van Til writes, “In the question of common grace there confronts us the same sort of situation that we have with respect to all other teaching of Scripture. Common grace presents us with a teaching that seems to contradict other teaching of Scripture.”⁵ A willingness to live in the tension, affirming doctrines that appear inconsistent with one another, is part of what Van Til called being “fearlessly anthropomorphic.”⁶

Mouw is willing to live in the tension as well. However, he goes beyond both Kuyper and Van Til. Not only does he embrace both common grace and the antithesis, but he also attempts to strike a healthy balance between a number of seemingly contradictory positions, such as pietism and doctrinal precision, confessional Calvinism and broad evangelicalism. Mouw works to avoid the pendulum swinging that so often occurs in theology and rejects polarized viewpoints.

Living in the tension between common grace and the antithesis has a number of practical applications that should be mentioned before this paper comes to a close. First, we must accept that the doctrine of common grace cannot be precisely pinned down. In the appendix to his work *Calvin and Common Grace*, Kuiper writes, “To be sure, all the leading spokesmen of Reformed Theology are agreed that there is a non-saving grace which is common to the elect and other sin-cursed creatures. But there is a marked difference of opinion among them with respect to various important questions touching this common

⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2d ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Philipsburg: P&R, 2015), 153.

⁶ See Oliphint’s discussion in Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, xxii-xxv.

grace.”⁷ The doctrine, in many ways, then, is a mystery. Richard Mouw is convinced of this, but quickly reminds us that “the workings of special grace are enshrouded in mystery as well, as our Lord reminds Nicodemus” (John 3:8). Furthermore, he adds that this reality “does not justify a simple retreat into agnosticism. While God’s saving ways are in the final analysis unsearchable, that does not mean that we should refuse to get clear about some of our thoughts on the subject.”⁸

While the concept of mystery certainly rubs against our post-enlightenment, Western sensibilities, it is good to remember that the doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility has long been affirmed by Reformed theology. Humanity can know God in a real sense, but “it is impossible for man to have a knowledge of Him that is exhaustive and perfect in every way.”⁹ There is much that has been revealed to us in the pages of Scripture, but, as Moses wrote, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deut 29:29). It seems that the intimate details of common grace fall into the latter category.

Second, living in the tension gives us the freedom to utilize the advancements of unbelievers. On this point, Calvin says, “if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths.”¹⁰ Because of God’s common grace, things discovered and produced by the unregenerate can be used by God’s elect for their benefit:

⁷ Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, xv.

⁸ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in all that’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 13-14.

⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 275.

As Solomon used the cedars of Lebanon (1 Kings 5:8-10), the products of the rain and the sunshine that had come to the covenant breakers, and as he used the skill of these very covenant for the building of the temple of God, so also those who through the Spirit of God have believed in Christ may and must use all the gifts of all men everywhere in order by means of them to perform the cultural task of mankind.¹¹

In other words, believers should not reject everything that typically labeled as “secular” or “worldly.” Bavinck writes, “Yet it would not do to deny the true, the good, and the beautiful that one can see in mankind outside of Christ. That would not only be in conflict with experience but would also entail a denial of God’s gifts and hence constitute an ingratitude toward him.”¹²

Third, living in the tension allows believers to give their gifts to the unregenerate and cooperate with them to build culture. One of the Christian’s three callings within society, according to Henry Van Til is “to join with the unbelievers in society as a whole and to seek the welfare of the whole.”¹³ As God commanded the exiles to seek the peace of Babylon (Jer 29:7), so should the followers of Jesus seek the peace of the cities in which they live:

As Calvinists, we must seek the common good with the clear awareness that in the public square we are surrounded by people ‘who call good evil and evil good, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter’ (Isaiah 5:20). And yet it is in these circumstances that we hear again the Lord’s ancient call to his redeemed people to seek the welfare of the city of our exile. This messiness, then, isn’t something that we can hope to eliminate; nor can we minimize it as we develop our strategies for public witness. To endorse a common grace theology is to learn to live with some theological messiness.¹⁴

This seems to be the cultural paradigm that John Calvin himself modeled. During his lifetime, the city of Geneva was completely revolutionized. Henry Osborn Taylor, in his book

¹¹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 138.

¹² Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 51.

¹³ Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 132.

¹⁴ Mouw, *He Shines in all that’s Fair*, 87.

Thought and Expression in the Sixteenth Century, says this of Calvin: “He lent the acumen of his mind and legal training to a codification of the city’s laws, and to the best adjustment of its taxes. . . . The city’s health was better for his aid in construction of sewers and the erection of hospitals. He concerned himself with the methods of heating and protection against fires; through him, the weaving industry was revived.”¹⁵ Furthermore, regarding the lasting impact that Calvin had in the arena of politics, Williston Walker of Yale University wrote, “The influence of Calvinism, for more than a century after the death of the Genevan Reformer, was the most potent force in Europe in the development of civil liberty. What the modern world owes to it is almost incalculable.”¹⁶ John Calvin saw creation structure of these different aspects of society and the negative direction that they had taken due to the fall, and redeemed them for the betterment of culture unto the glory of God.

Finally, living in the tension means that we can never be too firmly fixed on our answers. We must be willing to develop. Just as the doctrine of common grace experienced development in the Dutch Calvinist tradition throughout the twentieth century, so it will in the twenty-first century. “The Reformed doctrine of common grace is by no means a finished product.”¹⁷ It is not a fixed thing. It can and should continue to evolve.

This final point has major implications for the believer’s answer to the enduring problem of Christianity and culture. In his article critiquing Creation Order Neo-Calvinism, Stephen Mathonnet-VanderWell writes, “Their use of creational structures and spheres makes

¹⁵ Henry Osborn Taylor, *Thought and Expression in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1920), 423-424, quoted in Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 106.

¹⁶ Albert Hyma, *The Life of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, 1943), 96-97, quoted in Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 97.

¹⁷ Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, i.

them prone to explain too much, have too many answers, and claim expertise about too many things. They have a difficulty addressing the contextual and particular. They are wont to speak in the absolute and monolithic ‘the,’ not the more modest and nimble, ‘a.’”¹⁸ I think he is right about this. We live in a diverse world and need a diversity of answers contextualized to meet particular needs in particular places, as Mouw so artfully explains:

The fact is, of course, that we do not relate as Christians to culture as such. We stand in a relationship to one or another historically-embodied culture: to North American culture, South African culture, Scottish culture, Chilean culture. In an important sense, Christians do not relate to ‘business,’ they relate to the Canadian economic system; they aren’t involved in ‘art,’ they participate in the art-world of France. It is true that all cultural manifestations are contained within the one good creation. We must avoid a norm-less situation. But the creation is presently characterized by cultural pluriformity. More specifically, *sin* manifests itself in diverse ways, individually and culturally. Thus our responses to the presence of sin will differ from one cultural context to another.¹⁹

The task before us is not to simply copy and paste the ideas and models of previous generations. Mouw continues, “This is not to say that we have no guidance from the past as we look to these issues. But the guidance is often no stronger than a matter of hints and suggestions. It will not be enough merely to apply past formulations to the present. We must reformulate-reform-on the level of theory.”²⁰ We must contextualize rather than offer one broad, sweeping answer. We must, as Kuyper himself has said, “go back to the living root of the Calvinist plant, to clean and water it, and so to cause it to bud and blossom once more, now fully in accordance with our actual life in these modern times.”²¹ We must accept the

¹⁸ Mathonnet-VanderWell, “Reformed Intramurals: What Neo-Calvinists Get Wrong,” *Perspectives* 23 (2008): 14.

¹⁹ Richard J. Mouw, “Reforming Cultural Calvinism,” *Reformed Journal* 31 (1981): 15-16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 171.

reality of God's common grace towards the reprobate, while simultaneously refusing to overlook the antithesis. Living in this tension will help us as we faithfully seek to live *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

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